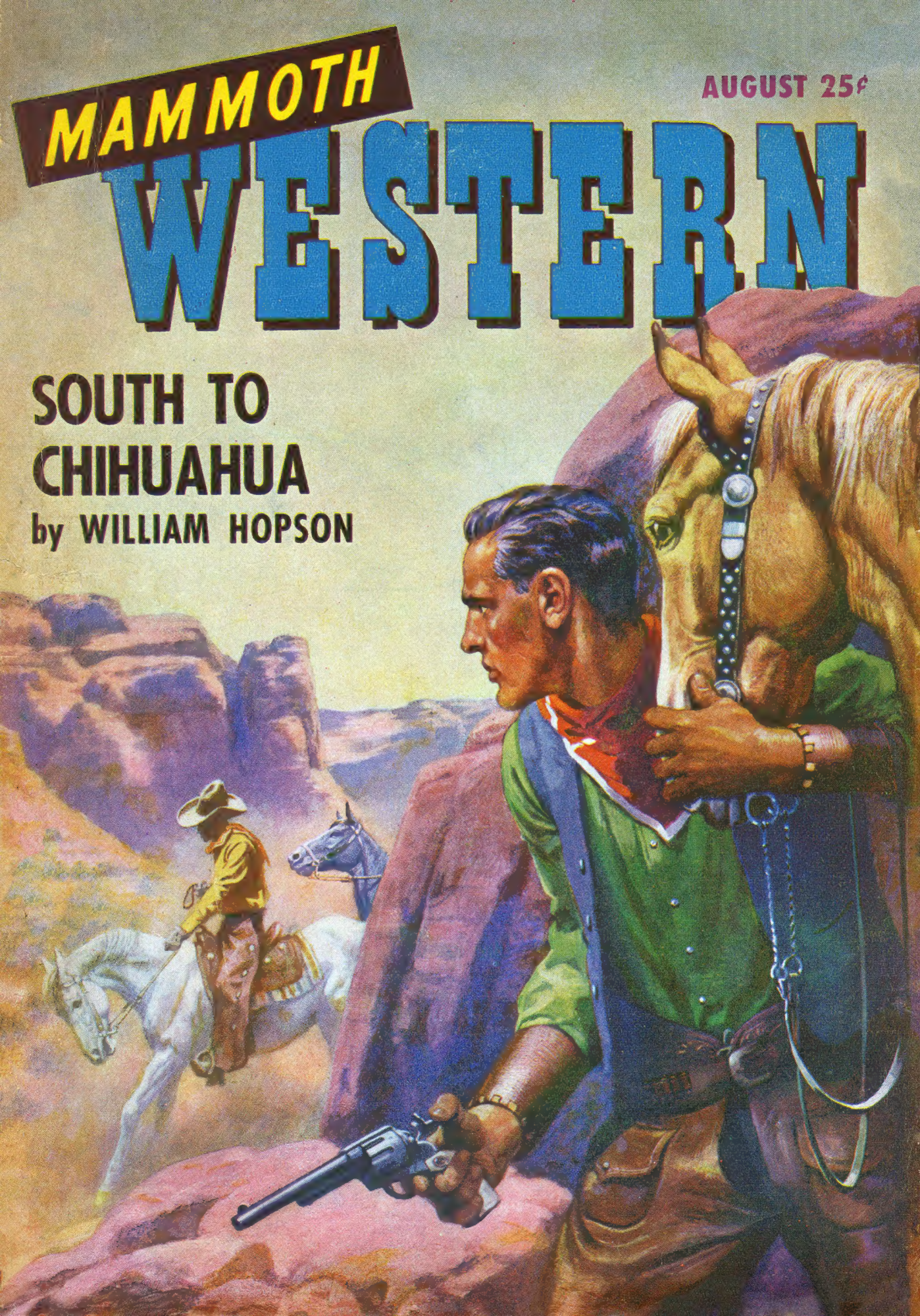
MAMMOTH WESTERN

AUGUST 25¢

SOUTH TO CHIHUAHUA

by WILLIAM HOPSON



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AUGUST 1947

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VOLUME 3 NUMBER 4

All Stories Complete

GUNS FOR THE VALLEY (Novelet—14,500) ..... By Russell Storm 8
Illustrated by William A. Gray

It's a tough row to hoe for a family who wants to live in the west, and isn't interested in the business of cattle!

MOUNTAIN ROAD TO RUIN (Short—9,500) ..... By Giff Cheshire 34
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There are plenty of ways to go wrong—and when you've taken the wrong road, the obstacles seem to multiply naturally . . .

BIG DOIN'S AT LITTLE FORK (Short—7,000) ..... By Berkeley Livingston 52
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Little Fork had always been quiet—but now there were big things stirring; all because of a little girl come of age.

SOUTH TO CHIHUAHUA (Novel—65,000) ..... By William Hopson 66
Illustrated by Joe Wirt Tillotson

Mexico had become a hot-bed of action, and when these men marched south, things began to pop that would make history.

Front cover painting by Walter H. Hinton

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RIDIN' HERD with the Editor

DURING the past two years we've published quite a few novels by William Hopson. Two years is enough to prove to any editor just how good he is—because in two years his readers can tell him so in no uncertain fashion. Therefore, when you see the name William Hopson on our cover, featuring his novel "South To Chihuahua," his latest contribution to *Mammoth Western*, you can be sure that here is one of the best novels of the west we've ever published. It's authentic too. Hopson knows what he's talking about. He lives down there, he IS a westerner! Not the story-book kind of westerner, but a real one. On the opposite page you'll see pictorial proof of it. Yes, that's William Hopson, and we can vouch for the fact that this is no staged picture, and that it's the real thing from the hat down to the beard.

WE FIRST met Bill when he walked into our office and looked anything but western. You see, he was in uniform then. And all he said was: "I'm on leave, and I'm broke, and I want to remember Chicago as a swell place. Want to invest ten bucks in a western writer you never heard of before—and won't hear from until this fracas is over?" Well, to hear Bill tell about it, we gave him the Empire State building. But it was only ten bucks. But those ten pieces of green paper bought the heart and soul of *Mammoth Western*. It bought the *real thing*. Yes, *Mammoth Western's* the best damn western magazine on the stands today because Bill Hopson had a good time in Chicago while on leave!

NOW he's out of uniform, and back out west where he loves to be. Not forking a bronc, mind you, but an airplane, which he says, "eats a hell of a lot of gas while flying upside down." That ought to give you some idea of the guy—it isn't enough to fly, but he has to do it upside down! Well, he's a grand guy, and we like him. He's writing grand stories, and right now he's committed to three novels a year for us—so you know what's in store for you in the future!

ANOTHER top-notch writer in this issue is Russell Storm, who writes "Guns for the Valley." We can recommend this yarn on the following counts: It has action; it has real, live characters; it has emotion; it has plot; it has the touch of the expert and breathes that "spirit" we have come to associate with the west in the romantic corner of our imaginations. You'll like Storm, because he's got what we all want—real escape.

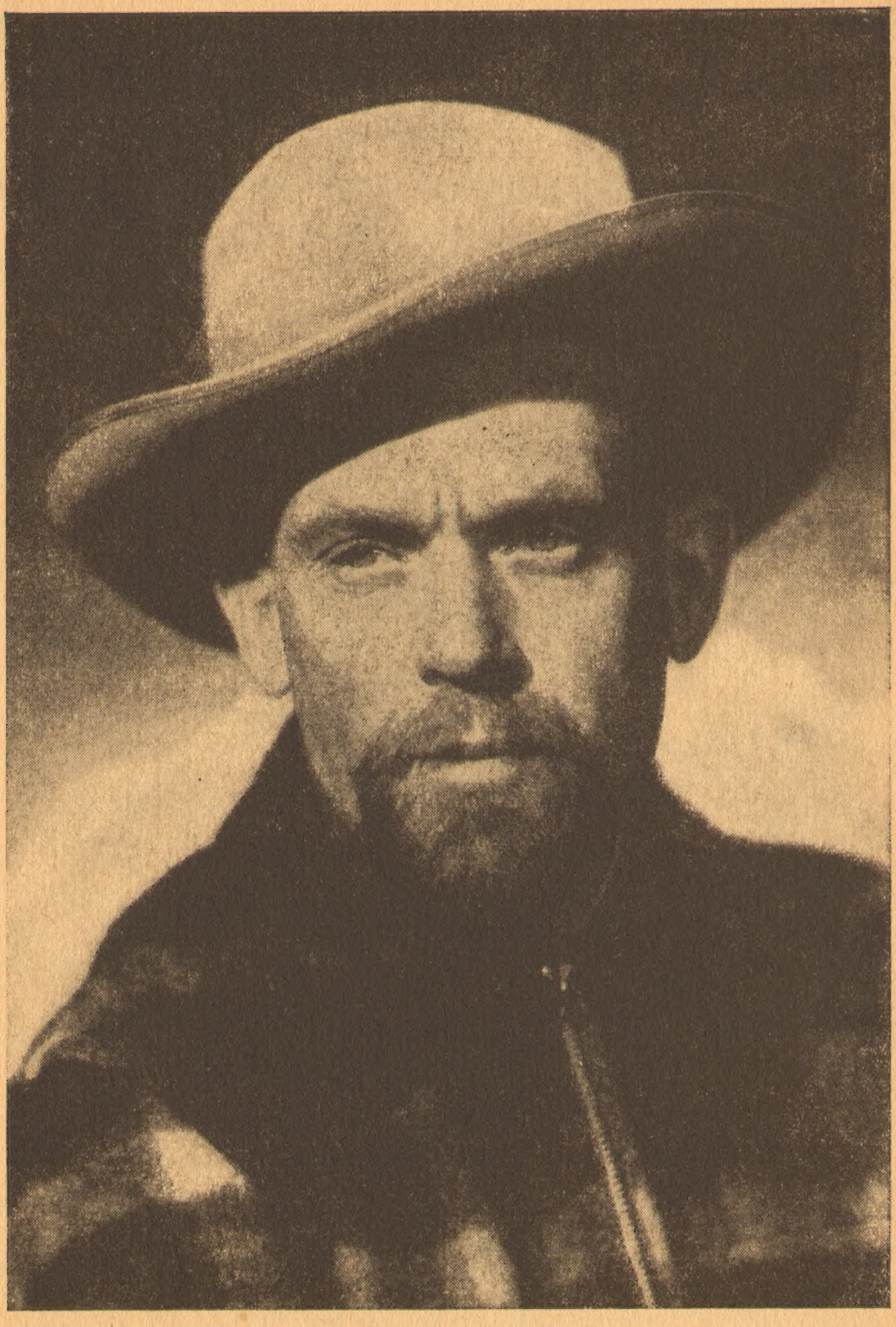
GIFF CHESHIRE might have gone a bit "moral" on us in his "Mountain Road to Ruin" but we think you'll find that there's a heck of a sock on that mountain road that has more to do than just the idea of meeting up with unexpected natural obstacles, like a boulder on the trail! This guy Cheshire can make even a stone live in his stories! Just what the editor ordered!

REMEMBER Berkeley Livingston? Of course you do. Well, he's back with "Big Doin's at Little Fork" and as usual, it's a different angle to the old west. Berkeley has a habit of writing about the west as nobody else does—and though sometimes it's a bit shocking, it doesn't take long to swing over to his ideas and find out there's something new in the west after all. Clever boy, that Livingston.

OUR true feature articles have proven so popular that we've decided to put in as many of them as we can, each issue. This month we've really hit the jackpot. We've got sixteen of 'em—count 'em yourself! And each one should help to make that morning bus ride to work, or that slack moment when you haven't enough time to read a whole story, a pleasure instead of a bore. And you'll learn something. We did, when we read them, and we appreciate it.

OUR next issue will feature a novel by Oscar J. Friend called "Range Doctor" which we think you'll find has plenty of guts to it. It's the story of a young doctor who goes out west—and finds that being a doctor there isn't at all like being a doctor back east. Sometimes the correct pills to administer seem to be lead pills, but you could never accuse a real doctor of giving his patients lead poisoning. Trouble is, some of the patients get the idea the doctor needs pills too—of the lead variety. Not exactly an even battle, but you'll be interested in finding out who wins that sort of a fight.

IN ADDITION there'll be some short stories from top writers and more interesting articles. Don't miss the October issue. *Rap.*



WILLIAM HOPSON

A real westerner is the author of "South To Chihuahua," featured full-length novel in this issue. Mr. Hopson in the author of numerous novels of the authentic west.

GUNS FOR THE VALLEY

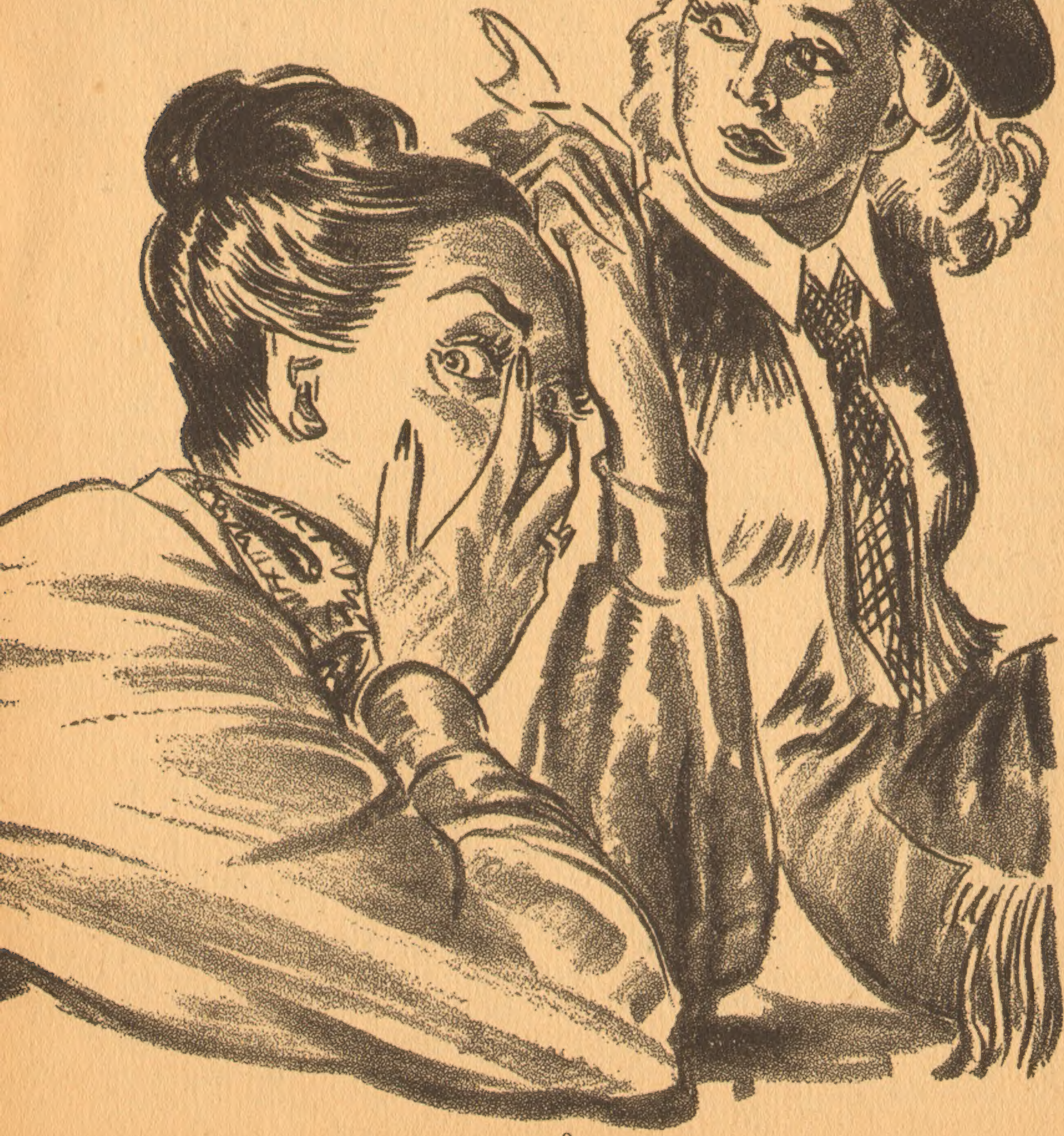
If there's anything cattlemen hate, it's a nester. Crenshaw was one, and they drove him out. But he came back!

They waited tensely behind the stockade for the assault they knew was coming . .

by Russell Storm

TOM CRENSHAW walked his horse up the last steep grade. This was Rattlesnake Pass he was entering. Beyond Rattlesnake Pass lay Maikop Valley. And Maikop Valley was—or had been—home.

Home! The hills of home! Beyond the mountains rising on the right and on the left, beyond Rattlesnake Pass, was home. Maikop Valley was still home to him although he hadn't been there in six years, not since the night



when he had fled from the valley, fled through Rattlesnake Pass, riding hell for leather down this very grade he was so slowly climbing now.

He had been seventeen years old that night. He had ridden for a preacher and had been returning home when he saw Max Hoffman's riders circling the little ranch house where his dead father lay, circling the house and shooting through the windows, shooting through the doors, whooping and hollering, riding their horses like the drunken, inflamed fools they were. It wasn't his father, Hoffman's riders had been shooting at that night. Oh, no. His father lay dead in that house, dead of a bullet through the guts, and those riders knew it. They were not after his father. They were after *him!* Only the fact that he had ridden for a preacher had saved them from getting him.

Tom Crenshaw had ridden away that night, had ridden south, toward the border country. If he stayed in Maikop Valley, he knew what would happen. Max Hoffman, with one exception, wanted no nesters in that broad expanse of semi-arid country, neither father nor son. Sooner or later Hoffman's men would get him, as they had gotten his dad.

Now he was coming back, back through Rattlesnake Pass, back to Maikop Valley, back to Max Hoffman, back to—yes, by God! He was coming back to her too! Back to shy, sweet, sixteen-year old Lucy Larkin. Only—the thought jarred him—she wasn't sixteen now. He still thought of her as he had seen her last, shy, sweet, sixteen. But she wasn't sixteen now. She was twenty-one, and a grown woman, a woman old enough for a man to marry.

She would be there, he knew. Her dad was the one nester in Maikop Valley that Max Hoffman hadn't burned out, or murdered, or run off. Tom Crenshaw had never known why Max Hoffman's riders had left the little Larkin ranch strictly alone when everybody else who tried to homestead in the valley was promptly ordered out. But Hoffman had left them alone. And that meant that Lucy would still be there! His heart jumped at the thought of her.

Tom Crenshaw pulled his horse to a stop and looked back along the trail he had followed. He could see the two wagons all right, the two wagons piled high with tarpaulin-covered freight, the driver on the seat, the six mules pulling each wagon, the saddled horse following behind each endgate. Briscoe and his wife were in the lead wagon, to keep the dust from blowing back in Jean's face. Jack Hepburn was hunched up on the seat of the second wagon.

Two toy men and a toy woman riding in toy wagons piled high with toy freight. From this height they looked like toys all right, but these two toy men and the toy freight in the wagons had made possible his return to Maikop Valley. Roy Briscoe, in the lead wagon, was all bull-dog tenacity, and Jack Hepburn, in the second wagon, was all slender coiled snake ready to strike. Hepburn was one of the fastest gunslingers in the southwest. Briscoe was not quite as fast with a gun but what he lacked in speed, he more than made up in fighting heart. What Roy Briscoe took hold of, he didn't let go of.

Two gunmen to meet Max Hoffman's men! Two gunmen but not two outlaws, not two desperados, not two long riders. Neither Hepburn nor Briscoe had ever, or would ever, draw a gun except in defense of his own or his partner's life. Both had learned the bitter fact that a drawn gun cannot be put back into the holster again.

Max Hoffman drew his gun five years ago. Tom Crenshaw thought. *If he wants to put it back in the holster and*

keep it there, all right, but I'm coming back, and I'm bringing two men with me.

WOULD Max Hoffman leave the gun in the holster when he learned that Tom Crenshaw was back in Maikop Valley and that the nester's son had two gunmen with him? Tom doubted it. Hoffman would remember that his men had killed this man's father. That would be enough reason to start guns blazing. And when Hoffman learned why Tom Crenshaw and Roy Briscoe and Jack Hepburn were in Maikop Valley, he would have still another and more compelling reason for sending his hard-riding crew out to murder and burn.

For they were coming to Maikop Valley to do the one thing that Max Hoffman would never tolerate, to homestead land, to start small ranches. For over twenty years Hoffman had fought the homesteaders and the nesters for possession of this vast stretch of semi-arid land, fought them with threats when threats were enough, fought them with guns and flame when threats would not do the job. Considering that, would he let three homesteaders come into the valley now?

It ain't likely, Tom Crenshaw thought.

His mind went on to the valley beyond the pass. Max Hoffman did not own the land in Maikop Valley. He held it by guns and by drouth. Back there in those wagons, Tom Crenshaw had the means to lick the drouth. When the arid nature of the land was licked, there could be many small ranches in that vast stretch of land. Tom Crenshaw thought of fat cattle laying in the shade of cottonwood trees, or ranch houses with kids tumbling around the doors. That was what he wanted, what Hepburn wanted, what Briscoe wanted. Briscoe especially wanted that. The bloom on the cheeks of his wife riding back there on the wagon seat beside him, the quietly shining light already in her eyes, proved there would be kids to play around the first ranch house by the time they got it built.

Let Max Hoffman try to stop them! Let him try to turn me and my partners back, let him try to run us off! Tom Crenshaw thought.

If Hepburn was all coiled snake ready to strike and Briscoe was all bulldog to hold on to what he had, Tom Crenshaw was both snake and bulldog. Speed to strike with and the determination to hold on, he had both!

Ride Max Hoffman down!

He saw the puff of smoke come from the top of the cliff on the right side of the trail.

The rifle bullet passed within inches of his head.

His sixgun was out of the holster before he heard the crash of the rifle.

Smoke jutted from the top of a flat boulder on top of the cliff. Tom Crenshaw caught a glimpse of the top of a hat and a rifle barrel thrust over the top of the boulder. He snapped a shot upward.

It was two hundred yards to the top of the boulder. The angle was up. All he had for a target was the top of a hat and a brown, unrecognizable face squinting at him along a rifle barrel. Even before he shot he knew the range was too great for the slow-moving, heavy slug from the Colt to find its target.

The rifle snarled smoke at him again. For the long gun, the range was not too great. The bullet screamed downward. It nipped his horse on the left shoulder. The animal, already startled by the noise of the rifle and of the sixgun, went straight up. Tom Crenshaw threw himself out of the saddle.

He hit going backwards on the left hand side of his horse. For a moment, as he sprawled backward in the rough trail, he was afraid the bucking horse was going to land on top of him. He scrambled back out of the way. The horse, feeling its rider gone, snorted and ran up the trail between the cliffs.

The rifle knocked rocky chips in his face as a third shot came downward. Ducking for cover, he snapped another bullet upward. There was a boulder beside the trail. A trickle of water had dug out a hole beside and behind it. He dived into the hole. A bullet from the rifle on top of the cliff bounced off the top of the boulder as he went out of sight behind it.

"That jasper is sure getting the range!" he muttered, ducking.

HOW many men were on top of the cliff? One? He had only seen one but there might be more. There might be another one across on the other side of the pass. If Max Hoffman had learned he was coming back to Maikop Valley, there might be three or four men waiting in Rattlesnake Pass.

And Hoffman had learned he was coming back. The rifleman proved it.

Crenshaw vehemently wished he had his own rifle from the saddle scabbard. With a rifle, he could make things interesting for the man on top of the cliff. But he hadn't had time to draw his rifle before his horse had started bucking. He stuck his head around the corner of the boulder.

A bullet spatted into the ground behind him.

Were they going to be stopped from entering Maikop Valley? If a man on a horse couldn't get through, the slow moving wagons would be sitting ducks for the marksman on top of the cliff. A bullet in a mule would stop the wagons completely.

"Damn him!" Tom Crenshaw gritted. "He can stop us right here and we'll never be able to get into the valley!"

Down below him, he heard the sound of drumming hooves. Looking back, he saw Hepburn and Briscoe riding up the trail.

His two partners had heard the shots.

They rode like Indians, low and to the left side of their mounts.

They were riding straight into the fire of the rifleman on top of the cliff.

Tom Crenshaw took one look at the two men riding hell for leather up the trail and he came out from behind the boulder where he was hiding. The man with the rifle had to be prevented from getting a free shot at Hepburn and Briscoe. The big revolver in Crenshaw's hand boomed and boomed again. The hat was gone from the top of the boulder and the rifle no longer slanted across it, leaving him without a target to shoot at. Aiming at the boulder, he emptied his gun.

There was no response from the rifle.

He broke the pistol, ejected the empty shells, plugged fresh cartridges into the cylinder.

Still the rifle was silent.

He shot again.

Hepburn and Briscoe slid their horses to a stop beside him.

"Tom! You all right?" Hepburn called.

"I'm all right."

"What's the shootin' all about?" Briscoe spoke.

"There's a man up there who don't like the color of my hat," Crenshaw answered.

"Cover for me," Hepburn yelled. "I'm going through and see how he likes my hat. No, Roy. You stay here with Tom and cover the top of the bluff with your rifle."

Hooves clattered as Hepburn put the spurs to his horse. Briscoe yanked his rifle from its scabbard and slid out of the saddle.

"Where is he?" he yelled.

"Give me the rifle and I'll show you." Crenshaw snatched the rifle from his partner's hand, sent a slug screaming upward. Chips flew from the boulder where the hidden rifleman had been hiding but there was no answering shot.

"Looks like he's cleared out," Briscoe said.

They watched Hepburn ride through the pass. Later he appeared on horseback on top of the bluff where the killer had lain in ambush. He had gone through the pass and had ridden up the easier slope on the farther side. He waved his hat at them. They saw him dismount and scan the countryside. From the top of the cliff all of Maikop Valley was visible to him.

"Nobody home!" his yell floated down. "Bring the wagons on through and I'll cover for you."

THEY had come to Maikop Valley. And had been met by gunfire warning them off. Hepburn's clear yell symbolized the reaction of Crenshaw and Briscoe, and, when they went back to the wagons and told her what had happened, of Jean Briscoe too.

"Bring the wagons on through and I'll cover for you!" Jack Hepburn had said.

They were going to enter Maikop Valley. And more than gunfire would be needed to stop them.

They stopped the wagons at the end of the pass. Roy Briscoe got down from the lead wagon and gently helped his wife to the ground. Tom Crenshaw came up from the second wagon. Above them on the bluff Jack Hepburn kept watch.

Maikop Valley lay before them.

It was the first day of May. Fleecy clouds floated high in the sky. A warm wind was blowing softly from the south. Before them, stretching away for mile after mile, was a gently rolling stretch of country. Treeless, except for occasional clumps of cottonwoods, the land stretched away and away as far as the eye could reach in a series of gentle undulations, a vast rolling valley surrounded by mountains.

The whole valley was covered with grass, buffalo grass and blue joint.

Looking at Maikop Valley, Roy Briscoe showed excitment. "Golly, Tom!" he said. "It's just like you said. There's enough grass right in front of our eyes to pasture more cows than we can count."

"That's right," Tom Crenshaw answered. "There's a catch, though."

"But the grass is there."

"Sure. The spring rains have just stopped. When the rains come, the buffalo grass and the blue joint jump out of the ground almost overnight. We're seeing Maikop just after the rains, when it's at its best. When the rains stop—"

"The grass will still be there," Briscoe protested. "It'll head out and go to seed when the rains stop. But that don't make any difference. Blue joint headed on the stem will fatten cattle almost as fast as corn."

"Sure," Tom Crenshaw agreed. "But the cattle have to have water. And the water isn't there, not after the rains stop. There's only eight natural springs in the whole valley."

"Um," Briscoe said. For a moment, his face was serious. Then he looked at the freight on their wagons and began to grin.

Maikop Valley was semi-arid. When the rains came, the buffalo grass and the blue joint grew like crazy weeds. Six weeks after the first rains came,

Maikop Valley was covered with enough grass to fatten fifty thousand head of cattle. Cattlemen, and Roy Briscoe was a cattleman, seeing this valley during the spring rains, thought that here was a cow heaven, here the beef animal would grow fat in weeks.

Then the rains stopped. The grass stopped growing. Quickly, hastily, it headed out, produced its seed. Then it waited for the next coming of spring.

Cattlemen, seeing this dried grass, still thought this valley was cow heaven. It was, almost. Grass was there, but the catch was there too. There wasn't enough natural water in the valley for the herds of cattle the grass would fatten. Grass unlimited, water short.

IN AN area where there was room for fifty thousand head of cattle, Max Hoffman ran less than five thousand head. There was water for that many. He owned the waterholes. He had had his men homestead the springs. Controlling the water, he controlled Maikop Valley.

Each year enough grass to fatten thousands of head of cattle went to waste in Maikop Valley.

Tom Crenshaw, seeing Roy Briscoe look at the tarpaulin-covered freight and grin, grinned with him. In those wagons they had the solution to the water-problem in Maikop Valley.

The solution was a well-digging machine and two dismantled windmills. Windmills were not exactly a novelty in this country, but they were new to many people. There had never been a windmill in Maikop Valley.

Max Hoffman would not permit windmills in the valley. Windmills would bring nesters, little ranchers, maybe even farmers, homesteaders to claim the range where grass went to waste each year.

"We'll lick the water problem, Tom!" Roy Briscoe said. "Then we'll bring up the five hundred head we've got down south and turn 'em loose in the valley. Ten years from now, you and me and Jack Hepburn will have more cows that we can count."

The bulldog note sounded in Roy Briscoe's voice as he spoke. He put his arm around his wife and they both stood looking down into the far reaches of Maikop Valley. Tom Crenshaw knew what the bulldog note in Briscoe's voice meant. Briscoe was seeing the ranch house he would build down there in the valley, the corrals, the windmills pumping water, cattle grazing in the distance, all the sights that went with a ranch. Most of all, he was seeing the kids that would play around that ranch house, the growing kids that would learn to ride down there in Maikop Valley, the tall sons that would eventually ride the range with him. That was what Maikop Valley meant to Roy Briscoe. And the bulldog trait in his character meant he would keep trying to get what he wanted until he got it, or until he was dead.

The sound of a loping horse came from behind them. Turning, Crenshaw saw Jack Hepburn riding down the slope from the top of the cliff. Hepburn turned his horse into the trail and rode up to them, then sat his mount and looked down over the valley.

"Well, there she is," he said at last. "All we've got to do to grab a piece of her for ourselves is to look out for a man with a home-made firing pin in his rifle."

Tom Crenshaw frowned. "What?" he said.

Hepburn grinned and tossed a couple of empty shells to him. "I picked those up on top of the cliff," he said. "If you look close, you can see that the gun that fired them had a home-made firing pin."

Tom Crenshaw turned the brass hulls

over in his fingers. They were rim-fire shells. The firing pin had dug a deep groove into the rims of each shell. "I see what you mean," he said. "But how are we going to find a rifle with a homemade firing pin before the man who owns it finds us?"

Hepburn shook his head. "I can't figure that out either, Tom," he said. "Well, it looks like Roy and Jean are ready to go." He nodded toward the first wagon.

Turning, Tom saw that Briscoe and his wife were getting back into the wagon. Briscoe gathered the reins in his hands, clucked to the mules.

The descent into Maikop Valley had begun.

THEY camped that night in the shadow of a little grove of cottonwood trees, in the spot that Tom Crenshaw remembered as home. It was in this spot that his father had exercised his homestead rights. The big three-room cabin made of split cottonwood logs had stood here. To this spot John Crenshaw had brought his motherless son and had established a home. In this place John Crenshaw had died. For three years he had withstood Max Hoffman while Hoffman moved slowly from threats to violence.

A thousand memories tugged at Tom Crenshaw as he rode up to the little grove of cottonwood trees. For three years this spot had been home to him and memories of it were impressed indelibly on his mind. He had helped build the cabin that had once stood here. He had helped cut the logs, had helped haul the stone for the big fireplace, and had helped his father place both logs and stone in position. He had helped build the pole corral where their little string of horses were kept at night, or had been kept, until one of Max Hoffman's riders had tossed a handful of salt mixed with strychnine over the top of the corral one dark night. After his father had managed to obtain three more mounts as a partial replacement for the dead horses, they had built a little barn. The barn was gone too. Weeds and grass were growing vigorously up through the ash-enriched soil where once the barn and the cabin had stood.

They set up the tent for Roy Briscoe and his wife, gathered wood, built a rude fireplace from the stones remaining from the big chimney of the cabin. Then Jean Briscoe began to rattle pots and pans. As the sun was sinking, the blue smoke from the little fire rose straight up into the still evening air.

Thick navy bean soup and flapjacks and thick slices of bacon, they had for supper. Then Tom Crenshaw went out and saddled his horse. Jack Hepburn came with him.

"Goin' for a ride, Tom?"

"Reckoned I would, Jack," Tom answered. He did not say where he was going and Hepburn accepted his silence without question. "Look out for that feller with the homemade firing pin," was Hepburn's sole comment.

Tom nodded. His hand went to the gun holstered at his hip. He rode away into the gathering dusk. As soon as he was out of sight, he lifted his mount into a long easy lope, a gait that ate up the miles. He had eight miles to go, as he remembered the distance. But long before he reached the ranch house, night had fallen. The first sight he caught of the house was a glimpse of a light burning in the kitchen window. His heart leaped at the sight.

A light was burning in the kitchen window of the house where Lucy Larkin lived! Up until this moment, he had not realized—he had not let himself realize—how much she meant to him. Now he knew that she was the biggest

lodestone pulling him back to Maikop Valley. Lucy, sweet Lucy! The memory of her sweet face and of her shy, gentle manner rose up in his mind and he put spurs to his horse to gallop the remaining distance and to pull up with a flourish in the front yard.

"Hello!" he sang out and swung out of the saddle without waiting for an answer.

"Coming," a voice sang out inside. The kitchen door opened before he reached it. Mrs. Larkin, Lucy's mother, wiping her flour-covered hands on a gingham apron, peered at him over steel-rimmed spectacles. "Come in," she said. "Come in. I'm just baking some pies for tomorrow."

Tom Crenshaw saw she didn't know him. "I guess you don't remember me," he said taking off his hat.

The steel-rimmed spectacles tilted down at him. "No, I guess I don't," she answered. "But that don't make no difference. Come on in anyhow and tell me who you are." She held the door open for him to enter.

"I'm Tom Crenshaw."

"Tom Crenshaw? No!"

"But I am Tom Crenshaw."

THE eyes behind the spectacles stared at him with frozen intensity. "You can't be," Mrs. Larkin answered. "You can't be Tom. You just can't be."

Tom grinned. Her surprise at seeing him was almost pathetic. But she remembered him all right. There was no doubt about it. And Lucy would remember him too. "Why can't I be Tom Crenshaw?" he asked.

"Because Tom Crenshaw is dead!" Mrs. Larkin whispered.

She thought he was dead. The fact startled him. "I'm a mighty live dead man," he answered. "Could I come on in?"

Holding the door half open, she was still standing in it. For a moment she made no move to let him enter. Then she stepped aside. "Of course," she answered, her voice still a whisper. "Come in. Of course."

Her eyes were on him as he stepped through the door and into a kitchen all fragrant with spicy smells from the pies baking in the oven of the big wood-burning range. A kerosene lamp burned brightly in a wall holder.

Mrs. Larkin took him by the arm and led him over to the lamp. "You want to see who I really am, Mom?" he said.

She nodded without speaking. Her eyes went over his face inch by inch. "You *are* Tom Crenshaw," she whispered at last. "We heard—we were told—you were dead."

"You don't want to pay too much attention to rumors," he answered. "I'm very much alive. And now—" He had been expecting her to meet him at the door. When she hadn't come to the door, he had expected to find her in the kitchen. But she wasn't in the kitchen either. "And now, where's Lucy?"

He saw the color go out of Mrs. Larkin's face as he spoke. She didn't answer. "Heavenly days!" she whispered. "Tom Crenshaw come back, and asking for Lucy!"

"Naturally, when I came back, the first thing I would do would be to come looking for Lucy," he said. "Where is she?"

She twisted her apron in her hands and looked at him from frightened eyes in a blanched face. He felt fear rise in him, a leather noose tightening around his heart. He had known fear before, the fear of men and of men with guns, the fear of death, but he had never known any fear like this, a fear that came so quickly and hit so hard.

"Where is she?"

"She—" Mrs. Larkin gulped. Words were forming on her lips but no sound was coming from her mouth.

"Is—Don't tell me she's dead!" he exploded.

She shook her head. "No. No! She's not dead. Tom! Your coming in here when I thought you were dead has shocked me so much I don't know what I'm saying or doing. You've got to give me time to catch my breath. Lucy's all right."

"Fine." A little of the fear went out of him. Lucy was all right. Maybe she wasn't at home right now but she was all right. That was the important thing. "Where is she?"

There was silence in the kitchen. The big clock on the wall ticked slowly and monotonously to itself. The fire popped in the range and steam wreathed out of the teakettle on the back of the stove.

"Where is she?" Tom repeated.

"Don't—don't you know?" Mrs. Larkin whispered.

"No. I don't know."

"She—Tom, she's married! She's at her own home, with her husband."

The big clock ticked on the wall. The fire sputtered in the range. "Married?" Tom Crenshaw whispered.

Mrs. Larkin nodded. Behind her spectacles her eyes were suddenly misty with unshed tears. "Tom, she thought you was dead. She almost died when she heard that, Tom. For two or three years she mooned around here like a sick turkey hen. Her dad and I was afraid she was going to die. Then she perked up a little and last year, she got married—"

TOM CRENSHAW was already moving toward the door. This place, this friendly good-smelling kitchen, the clock on the wall, the big wood-burning range, when he entered the room all of these things had suddenly brought his memories of Lucy vividly to his mind. For he remembered her here in this kitchen, he remembered her winding the clock, putting wood in the stove, pouring steaming water from the teakettle into a tin wash basin. In this place where the memories of her were so strong, he had learned one fact that made these memories foolish: she was married.

All he knew was that he wanted to get out of this kitchen, to get away from this house, to escape these terribly frustrating memories. For he had come back for her. And he had found she was gone from him. He walked blindly to the door.

"Tom! Don't take it so hard. There are other girls—"

He didn't hear her. He opened the door, started out, then paused as another thought struck him.

"Who'd she marry?" he asked.

Mrs. Larkin's face told him that she didn't want to answer this question. She didn't want to answer it at all. "Please, Tom—"

"Somebody else will tell me," he said dully. "I'd rather hear it from you. Who is the lucky man?"

Still she hesitated, her lips forming soundless words of protest. He waited. Finally she spoke.

"Mr. Hoffman," she spoke. "She married Mr. Hoffman."

"Mr. Hoffman!" Tom Crenshaw gasped. "Not Max Hoffman! No! Not him! Not Max Hoffman!"

Mrs. Larkin nodded. "Yes," she said. "Max Hoffman."

"My God!" He stood in the doorway, his hand on the knob. "But he's sixty years old!" he said explosively.

"Fifty-one," Mrs. Larkin said.

"Fifty-one or sixty, it makes no difference. He's an old man and she is just a girl. A marriage like that is

wrong any way you look at it."

Mrs. Larkin's lips formed in a straight line but she said nothing.

"One other question before I go," Tom Crenshaw said. "Who told you I was dead? Was it Max Hoffman?"

A slow nod was her answer.

"I thought so!" he said. "And how did he tell you I died?"

"He said you and your daddy were both killed by a bunch of rustlers that your daddy caught trying to run off your cows," Mrs. Larkin answered.

"Thanks," Tom Crenshaw said. "Thanks very much. And will you sort of forget that I was here tonight?"

A nod was her answer.

He went blindly out of the door. He had come back after Lucy. And he had found her married to his deadliest enemy.

As he stepped out the door a two-horse buggy turned in from the road and came to a stop beside the house. It was a brand-new outfit, the kind of a rig a man who wanted to make an impression on his neighbors would buy. It had everything, even side-lamps.

In the illumination from the side-lamps, Tom Crenshaw recognized the two people riding in the buggy.

Lucy - - - No, by God! Mr. and Mrs. Max Hoffman!

MAX HOFFMAN sat stiff and unmoving in the buggy. He was a big man and the fat of prosperity had made him even bigger. He was wearing an expensive gray hat with the brim curled at the edges. A heavy gold watch chain looped across his vest. He was smoking a long cigar.

Mrs. Larkin had come quickly to the kitchen door when she heard the buggy draw up. She knew who was in it and she knew who had just gone out of the door of her kitchen. Tom Crenshaw could hear her frightened breathing behind him. He still had his hat in his hand. Light from the open door streamed over him.

Lucy looked at him. "Tom!" she whispered. "Tom Crenshaw!" She glanced once at her husband as she spoke.

Max Hoffman held the reins very stiffly in both hands and stared in stunned disbelief at the man standing just outside the kitchen door and did not move a muscle. Lucy came out of the buggy in a flurry of skirts. She came quickly around the front of the team. Then her reckless pace slowed. She advanced toward Tom Crenshaw a step at a time, her eyes fixed on his face as if she was seeing a ghost.

She was taller, her hips were fuller, her clothes much better than the Lucy, Tom Crenshaw remembered. But the same sweet gentle shyness was on her face. She came close to him.

"Tom!" she whispered. "It's really you." Again she looked at her husband, a quick snapping glance that seemed to say: "You lied to me. You told me this man was dead. You lied!"

Tom Crenshaw saw the glance. He was hot and cold inside. He had a raging furnace in him. And a chunk of ice as big as the moon. Ice and fire and fury. The fury raging in him sent his hand an inch at a time toward his hip.

Max Hoffman saw the moving hand. And found his voice. "I'll have you know I'm not armed!" he wheezed.

Tom Crenshaw looked at his moving hand. It was actually fighting him, struggling with him to reach the butt of his gun. Behind him he could hear Mrs. Larkin's breathing grow more frantic. And Lucy was staring at him from haunted eyes.

"I tell you I'm not armed!" Max Hoffman hastily repeated.

"You're not?" Tom Crenshaw heard

himself say.

"No! No. I'm not."

Tom Crenshaw deflected his hand away from the butt of his gun. He hooked the thumb in his belt. He wondered if the hand would stay there.

It *had* to stay there! He could not shoot an unarmed man. He could not shoot a man in front of two women. He could not shoot a man in front of that man's wife.

And Lucy, no matter what else was true, was Max Hoffman's wife.

"Tom!" she was whispering. "I thought—I thought—"

"So I heard," he answered.

She looked over his shoulder at her mother. "You talked to mother?"

He nodded.

"Did she tell you—" Her voice was frantic. "Did she tell you how I almost died?"

"Yes," he said.

"You—you don't seem very pleased to see me."

He looked past her at Max Hoffman sitting stiffly in the buggy. "You're his wife," he said.

"Oh," she said. Her face began to change. When she first came toward him, there had been startled gladness on her face. Now the gladness was slowly going away. Before his eyes, she was suddenly drooping. "So I am," she said.

"Tom."

"Yes."

HER eyes were on his face. They were asking him to understand. They were begging with him, pleading with him. "Please understand me, Tom. Please, please, *please!*"

"I don't know what there is to understand," he said slowly.

"There's everything."

"The only thing I understand is there's your husband," he said. "Do you want me to kill him?"

His thumb came out of his belt and his hand moved toward his gun.

Max Hoffman flinched and almost dropped the reins. Lucy grabbed Tom's hand.

"No. No, Tom. No. No. With that between us—"

He let her push his hand away from the gun. "Do you love him?"

"Tom!"

"I want to know, Lucy. Do you love him?"

"That's not a fair question, Tom," Mrs. Larkin spoke behind him. "You have no right to ask her that. Mr. Hoffman is her husband." There was a frantic note in the mother's voice. "It's not fair for you to ask her if she loves him."

Tom Crenshaw slowly hooked his thumb in his belt. The challenge of Lucy's mother had bewildered him. He was all burning ice inside and the question he had asked had exploded out of his icy fury. He saw now that it wasn't a fair question and that he had no right to ask it. Asking a married woman if she loved her husband! What right had he to ask such a question?

"I'm mixed up," he said slowly. "I'm all torn to pieces inside. A lot of things have happened too fast for me to know what to think about them. I'm sorry, Lucy. I'm sorry, Mom. I don't want to make trouble but I'm so mixed up I don't really know what I'm doing or saying."

He paused and tried to marshall rebellious thoughts. "I came back here loving a woman and hating a man," he said, still speaking very slowly. "When I get here, I find the woman I love and the man I hate are married to each other. And two minutes after I find this out, I run right smack into both of them."

"Tom!" Lucy's eyes were suddenly

glowing. "You came back here loving a woman?"

"Well, it's a fact," he said, a little sullenly. "But don't mix me up any more, Lucy."

"Why do you hate Max Hoffman?" the girl spoke.

"Why?" The question dazed him. "I don't get it, Lucy. I don't begin to understand it. Why do I hate him? Don't you know the reason? Have you heard nothing but lies about this too? I hate him because his men killed my dad and tried to kill me. Ain't that enough reason to hate any man?"

His voice was all fire and ice. Hearing that voice, Max Hoffman squirmed on the seat of the buggy.

Lucy shrank away from Tom Crenshaw. "No!" she whispered. "I thought—everybody said—"

"That rustlers did the job?"

"Yes. That's what everybody said."

"And Max Hoffman said it louder and oftener than anybody else!" Tom Crenshaw spoke. "Well, let him say it here and now, let him say it again, let him say it to me."

HE STEPPED forward, away from the girl, stepped toward the buggy. All around him the night seemed to freeze. He was not aware of any sound or any sight except the gray-hatted, gold-chained, cigar-smoking, successful rancher sitting behind the flaring lamps in the expensive and impressive buggy.

"Say it now."

"I don't know what you're talking about. That's what everybody said—"

"And what did you say, you who knew better than anybody else what had really happened? What did you say?"

Hoffman shivered. He seemed to slump down on the buggy seat. The reins rattled on the dashboard from the effect of his shaking hands. "I'm not armed," he whispered. "I'm not armed."

Tom Crenshaw laughed. "And damned glad of it you are, too!" He turned to the girl.

"I'm going now," he said. "I've got a lot of thinking to do and I'm going to try to do it."

She was silent. He turned back to the man in the expensive buggy.

"Fair warning," he said. "The next time you see me, you had better be armed."

He paused. "I don't think I'll ever be able to hold my hand away from my gun again."

Turning, he put on his hat and walked to his horse. The starlit night seemed to crowd in around him with a thousand voices as he rode away. The voices in the night said the same words over and over again and again. Lucy—Married to Max Hoffman. The woman I love—married to the man I hate."

Tom Crenshaw never remembered how far he rode that night or where he went. The moon rose and he didn't see it. Coyotes yapped from the plain and he didn't hear them. An owl hooted far-off and he didn't know the bird existed. He let his horse pick its own way.

He had come back to Maikop Valley with great hopes. Maybe there wasn't wealth to be made here in this vast stretch of semi-arid land but there was certainly a comfortable living to be made in Maikop Valley. He really hadn't been looking for wealth anyhow. If he made a lot of money out of running a ranch here, all right, but if he just made enough money for security, a home, and happiness, that was all he really wanted. But a home and happiness had meant Lucy, and Lucy was married to another man. And what the hell could he do about that?

Kill Max Hoffman? How could he go to Lucy with the blood of her husband on his hands?

When his hand had started toward his gun, she had grabbed his arm.

"No. No! No, Tom!" Her voice was still in his ears. "With that between us—"

He was afraid the death of her husband would be a bar holding them apart forever.

What the hell could he do?

Leave Maikop Valley? The thought was luring. He had always thought of Maikop Valley as home but it was odious to him now and he wanted nothing to much as to get away from it. If he left, Lucy would not have to face the problems his presence raised. And Hoffman was certainly taking good care of her, the way she was dressed, the expensive buggy, the well-matched team, proved that he was giving her everything a reasonable woman could want. Maybe he had won her with lies, but even so, he was good to her. Go away and leave her alone!

He couldn't do it. Or not right away anyhow. His partners needed him. He had brought them here with fair promises that in this valley they might establish homes for themselves. True, they might have to fight for those homes, but they belonged to a fighting breed, and they would not run from a fight. Nor could he run away and leave them to fight alone.

They were his partners, they were his friends, they needed him. He had to stick with them.

"Whoa, up!" a voice in the moonlit night jarred him out of his daze. "Stop right where you are before I put a bullet in you!"

Tom Crenshaw pulled his horse back and looked around with suddenly startled eyes. A grove of cottonwood trees was in front of him, there was a dim line of rising hills to the left. Where was he? Had he wandered into the Double H Ranch, into Max Hoffman's stronghold? He hadn't noticed where he was going, he didn't know how long he had been riding, he didn't know where he was.

"Get your hands up in the air!" the voice snapped at him again.

This time he recognized the voice. And simultaneously he saw the reflection of moonlight from the sides and top of the tent. He knew where he was.

"Okay, Jack," he yelled. "It's me."

Jack Hepburn came slowly out from the shadow of the nearest cottonwood tree. A rifle was cuddled in his arms.

"Hi, Tom," Hepburn said. "I wasn't sure it was you."

"Are you standing guard?"

"Uh-huh," Hepburn said. "I thought I better. After all, there's a jasper who owns a rifle with a home-made firing pin in these parts. I wasn't at all certain he wouldn't pay us a visit tonight."

"Oh," Tom Crenshaw said. He had forgotten about the ambusher in Rattlesnake Pass. But Jack Hepburn had not forgotten. And Hepburn had quietly come out here to stand guard while Roy and Jean Briscoe slept. "Yes. We do have to think about him. But we have to think more about his boss."

"Yes," Hepburn agreed. "I want to talk to you about his boss, Tom. I want to know what you think he'll do when he learns our plans and how he'll go about doing it."

"I don't know what he'll do. The last time I saw him he was shaking in his boots and yelling he wasn't armed. But I caught him by surprise in a place where he wasn't expecting to see me and I caught him without a gun. The next time we see him, he'll have a gun and he'll have men with him who will also have guns."

"What?" Hepburn said. "You've

seen Hoffman?"

"UH-HUHH." Tom Crenshaw slid from his horse and told what had happened. He told everything that had taken place, how he had gone to see Lucy, had discovered she was married, and how she and her husband had driven up while he was still at her parents' house. Jack Hepburn listened quietly.

"I'm sorry to hear this, Tom," he said, when Crenshaw had finished. "I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am. I know how you must feel."

His voice was warm with sympathy and with understanding. "It's a rough deal, Tom."

"Uh-huh. And the only consolation I've got is that it will probably get a darned sight rougher before it gets any easier, if it ever gets easier."

"I agree. Well, we didn't come up here expecting a picnic and we can't run just because the going is getting tough. But I do say—" Tom saw Hepburn look keenly at him. ". . . since you've found your girl married to another man, if you want to pull out and leave, I'll not stand in your way. And I'm sure Roy and Jean feel the same way about it."

"I'm not leaving," Tom answered. "I haven't got much to stay for but I'm going to stay and draw cards and see what I catch on the draw."

"Good boy!" Hepburn said. "Listen! What's that?"

Tom Crenshaw had already heard the sound and was turning to locate. Somewhere off in the moonlit night a horse was trotting."

Jack Hepburn's hands tightened on the butt of his rifle. "Maybe our friend with the home-made firing pin," he said.

The sound of the trotting horse came nearer and nearer and then stopped.

"Maybe leaving his horse out there and coming the rest of the way on foot," Jack Hepburn said. "He thinks he can sneak up on us on foot and empty his gun before we even known anybody is within miles of us. Ain't he due for a surprise, though?"

His voice was a grim whisper in the star-lit night. He patted the stock of his rifle. "Kill me a dry gulcher, gun; kill me a dry gulcher."

Tom Crenshaw quietly lifted his own rifle from its saddle scabbard. His horse lifted its head and looked off in the night in the direction from the sound of the trotting animal had come. Tom went quickly to the horse's head and held its muzzle so it would not whinny.

"Think it might be a stray?" he said.

"Might be but I don't think so. It trotted like a ridden horse. Of course, it could be a stray, but it could be something else too."

There was no sound in the night. The horse had stopped trotting. They waited.

"I'll go see," Hepburn said quietly.

"No," Tom Crenshaw protested. "You stay here. If you go out there, I might put a bullet in you by mistake."

"Okay," Hepburn grumbled. "But I don't like the idea of somebody sneaking up on us."

"We'll see him before he sees us."

They waited. Far-off, a lonely coyote howled at the moon. Just out of the shade of the cottonwood a bat was hunting gnats. Tom Crenshaw could see the darting motions of the bat.

The sound of the horse did not come again.

"I don't like it," Jack Hepburn whispered. "He can see the tent. He'll head for that. And Roy and Jean—

"Hello!" a voice called hesitantly in the darkness.

"That's a woman!" Hepburn gasped.

"I know it." Tom Crenshaw started

forward.

"Wait. It might be a trap."

"Hello!" the voice came again.

"Lucy!" Tom Crenshaw yelled. "Lucy, is that you out there?"

"Yes," the answer came. "Where are you? I've been afraid to come closer—"

"Come on up!" Tom Crenshaw yelled. And as the sound of the trotting horse came again, coming closer and closer now, he told Jack Hepburn who the woman was who was coming toward them in the night.

"Great golly whoppers!" the startled Hepburn gasped. "Hoffman's wife coming looking for us! How in the hell did she know where we were? And what is she doing here?"

"I'll ask her," Tom Crenshaw said. "I'd kind of like to know the answer to those questions myself."

The horse clip-clopped closer in the moonlight, came to a stop beside them.

"Tom—" Then she saw that he was not alone.

"This is Jack Hepburn, Lucy," Tom Crenshaw said.

"Pleased to meet you," Hepburn said. "Are you alone?" He tried to look beyond her into the moonlight and the rifle was ready in his hands.

The question, and the meaning back of the question, startled her. "Yes. I'm alone," she said hastily. "Tom. I want—I would like to talk to you—"

"I'm listening," Tom Crenshaw said.

"But—" Her eyes went to Jack Hepburn.

"He's my partner," Tom said. "How did you know where I was, Lucy?"

"Max told me," she answered. "He didn't much want to but I finally got it out of him."

Tom knew that Hepburn glanced quickly at him. "Max told you?" he repeated. "How did Max know? We only got here today."

THE question seemed to surprise and confuse her. "I didn't ask him how he knew," she admitted. "I didn't even know he knew until he let it slip that he knew something. He was very angry after you left. He talked and acted like he had gone crazy. While he was raving he said something about you being camped here in Maikop Valley. Why do you ask such a question? Is it important?"

"It might be," Tom said. "But let it go. Does Max know where you are now?"

"No. No one knows. I slipped away. We came to visit daddy and mother tonight but Max decided he wouldn't stay. So he went back—back home and I slipped out and saddled my horse and rode here. No one knows where I am, not even daddy and mother."

"Good," Jack Hepburn spoke. For the first time since they had heard the trotting horse, he let the rifle slide down into the crook of his arms.

"What did you want to see me about, Lucy?" Tom spoke.

She was slow in answering. "This is hard to say, Tom," she said at last. "But it's got to be said. I've got to know the truth. You said your daddy was killed by Double H men and that they tried to kill you too. How do you know this is the truth?"

"How do I know they were Hoffman's men?" he whispered. The question dazed him. He had never questioned the identity of the men whom he had seen circling the ranch house that terrible night. He knew whose men they were, knew it beyond the shadow of a doubt.

"This is terribly important," the girl went on. "I want to know, I have to know. You never once mentioned any trouble between your daddy and—and Max."

"Of course I didn't. We kept our

troubles to ourselves. I wouldn't tell anything like that to a girl anyhow."

"I'm not a girl now. I'm a woman. And you can tell me."

"All right. I'll tell you." While Jack Hepburn listened quietly, he told her the whole story, including the threats Hoffman had made, the poisoned salt in the horse corral, the bullet from ambush that had killed his father, how he had seen the men circling the ranch house. "You know Max Hoffman won't let a nester settle in Maikop Valley," he finished. "Besides, there is no one else would stand to gain anything—"

"He never molested my daddy," Lucy interrupted.

"I know that," Tom Crenshaw answered. "And I've often wondered why but not until tonight did I know the reason."

"You mean *I* was the reason he left daddy alone?"

"What else?" he answered.

Again she was silent. When she spoke again, her voice was seething with suppressed anger. "In this country, no one ever tells a woman anything. All the bad things, the real things, the vital things, are kept from her."

"You mean, you didn't know any of this?"

"Until you told me, I didn't have even the faintest idea of these things. Max — my husband — didn't tell me. Daddy and mother, if they knew anything, kept quiet. You, when you were here, said nothing. There aren't very many people here and the few I know in town either didn't know anything about this or didn't think they should talk about it."

"You mean you've been living with a man without knowing he was a scoundrel?" Hepburn questioned. There was amazement, and something more than amazement, in the tones of his voice.

"Of course I didn't know it!" she hotly answered. "He isn't a scoundrel to me. He's always nice to me, he's always kind. How was I to know he is—is—"

THERE was a sob in her voice as she spoke. "I hate this whole business!" she blazed. "I hate everyone and everything connected with it. It's not fair to a woman to pretend she's sugar and spice and ought never to hear any of the bad things in life."

"Well, you've heard some of them now," Hepburn drawled.

"But how do I know I've heard the truth?" Again hot anger shook her voice. "Tom tells me that my husband killed his father, or had him killed, which amounts to the same thing. But I haven't seen Tom in years and how do I know he's telling the truth. Max says it isn't the truth."

"Max also said I was dead and you know that was a lie," Tom Crenshaw spoke.

"Yes, I know it now. But he might have been mistaken just as everyone else was mistaken."

There was a frantic, an almost hysterical note in her voice. "When I have been told so many lies, how am I going to know what to believe?"

"I guess you'll have to find out for yourself, I guess you'll have to make up your own mind," Hepburn drawled.

"But—"

"People do, in this world," Tom Crenshaw said. The truth was suddenly clear before his eyes. Lucy had never grown up. She had never had the opportunity to grow up. She was still a little girl, sheltered and protected from the world. She wasn't an adult, she had never had a chance to become an adult. All her life her mother and father had evaded the truth about the world around her, they had never told her how grim, how brutal, how vicious

it really was. Her husband had kept the truth hidden from her too, for good reasons. And he, Tom Crenshaw, was to blame too in this matter. For he hadn't told her the truth about Max Hoffman. He had been silent when he should have spoken, he had been evasive when he should have been forthright. If Lucy hadn't had a chance to grow up, he, too, was partly to blame.

She was growing up now, growing up before his eyes. She was suddenly seeing the world she lived in, seeing the man she lived with, with a clear vision. And she was in torture because she could not distinguish, had never been taught to distinguish, the true from the false.

"I'm sorry, Lucy—" He fumbled for words to tell her how he felt.

"No. Don't be sorry for me. And don't try to hide things from me. I want to know the truth."

"But—"

"Just because the truth is bitter is no reason why I shouldn't know it. I've got to know. I've got to make up my own mind."

He sensed what a bitter experience this must be for her. Just a few hours earlier, she had been happy, contented, at peace with herself and at peace with the world of which she knew so little. Then suddenly she had met him again, and in a few hot minutes, her world had been smashed to pieces before her eyes. She was as hurt, as shocked, as terrified as—as he was!

They were both growing up, here, now, beside this grove of cottonwood trees, in a moonlit night.

Crack!

THE sharp explosion of the rifle spun Tom Crenshaw around. He caught a glimpse of flame two hundred yards away, he heard the snap of the bullet. A tinny rattle sounded in the tent as the slug went home. And Jean Briscoe, sleeping beside her husband in the tent, screamed suddenly in the night.

Crack! That was Jack Hepburn shooting, aiming at the spot where he had seen the flash of the killer's gun. Hepburn levered the empty shell out of his rifle and shot again. Then he was running toward the spot from which the first shot had come.

And Lucy's horse, frightened by the roar of the rifle, was bucking as only a frightened horse can.

She had not dismounted during their talk.

"Tom—"

He heard her frightened cry and turned just in time to see her thrown from the saddle.

She hit in a sprawling bundle on the ground.

"Lucy—"

She was already getting to her feet before he reached her. He helped her to rise. She held on to her left arm with her right hand.

"Are you hurt?"

"I'm all right. Who fired that shot?"

"Probably the same man who tried to kill me in Rattlesnake Pass. I haven't got time to tell you the whole story."

"Never mind the story. It can wait. Go see what's happened."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm right enough. Go see—"

Again the rifles were spitting fire in the night. And Roy Briscoe was frantically yelling. "Jack! Tom!"

Then the guns stopped. A man screamed. A rifle spat again. And Tom Crenshaw was running toward the sound.

He found Jack Hepburn lying flat on the ground.

"Jack!"

"I think I got him," Hepburn answered.

"Oh. Then—"

"He dusted my pants but I think I put one in him. Move over there twenty or thirty feet so he can't get both of us at once and we'll go see," Hepburn drawled, getting to his feet.

Keeping apart, they advanced slowly. That spot? No, it was a bush. Something moving over there? Just a shadow on the ground. There? No, I guess not.

They heard him choking before they saw him. By the time they reached him he was already dead.

Hepburn started to strike a match. "Wait a minute," Tom objected. "There might have been two of them."

"I don't think so, Hepburn said but he waited anyhow. The night was silent. Roy Briscoe had stopped calling to them. Then Hepburn bent over and striking a match, cupped it in both hands.

A dirty brown face stared up at them. Stringy black hair and a dirty shirt with a hole in it where a bullet had entered.

"A Mex," Hepburn said. He looked around. "Where's his gun?"

"Over there." Tom saw the rifle, picked it up and handed it to Hepburn, who slowly slid the breech open and extracted the empty shell from it. He struck another match and carefully examined the cartridge.

"Same firing pin," he said. "Same rifle. Probably the same man. Did you ever see him before?"

He held the match over the brown face while Tom Crenshaw looked. Tom shook his head. "No. I don't recognize him anyhow."

He barely heard the footstep but the sound was strong enough to bring his rifle instantly to his shoulder. Hepburn, seeing the movement, sprawled full length on the ground, jerking his own gun into firing position.

"What is it?" Hepburn hissed.

"I heard a step."

A shadow moved. His rifle leaped to cover it.

"Tom!" a frightened voice said.

Lucy's voice. She had come through the grove looking for them. Tom lowered his gun. "You'd better stay back, Lucy," he said.

"Stay back? Why?"

"Well—"

"There's a dead man here," Hepburn spoke.

"Oh," she whispered, then came toward them.

"It's not a nice sight, Lucy," Tom protested. "You better stay away. I mean, you're a woman—"

"THAT was a good reason a few hours ago," her grim answer came. "It's not a good reason now and it won't ever be a good reason again. I've finally learned there are a lot of things in life that aren't pretty that I have to look at. Strike another match, please."

Hepburn rose to his knees, cradled his rifle in the crook of his arm, and struck another match. She leaned over to look at the figure lying on the ground.

Tom Crenshaw could see how white her face was. And how determined. She didn't want to look at the man lying on the ground, she would rather do anything else on earth, but she was going to do it if the sight killed her.

Her face seemed to freeze as she looked at him.

"Know him?" Hepburn spoke suddenly.

She straightened up. "I—" Her gaze went from Hepburn to Tom Crenshaw.

"You either do or you don't," Tom said.

"I know him," she said.

"Ah," Hepburn spoke.

"He works— He's part Mexican and part Indian. —I've seen him around—"

The words failed.

"Around where?" Tom said.

She took a deep breath. "Around the Double H," she said. "Around—my husband's ranch. He works for—for my husband."

"And do his duties include killing people that your husband don't like?" Hepburn quietly questioned.

"I don't know. I don't know. Please —"

"Let her alone," Tom spoke. "She's had an awful shock."

"Sure," Hepburn agreed. "I've had one too." He fingered a bullet hole in his sleeve. "I've got one more question I want to ask."

"It can wait," Tom said hotly.

Jack Hepburn looked quietly up at him. "I'm your partner, Tom," he said.

Tom Crenshaw took a deep breath. The impulse to protect Lucy was strong in him.

"I know how you feel," Hepburn said. "But I'm your partner. You *know* I'm fighting on your side."

"Meaning—"

"Not meaning anything. I just want to ask a question."

"I'll answer it," Lucy spoke quickly. "I'll answer any question you, or anybody else, wants to ask."

"All right, Tom?" Hepburn asked.

Tom Crenshaw swallowed. This was Jack Hepburn, this was his friend, his companion, his partner, talking. "All right," he said.

"When was the last time you saw this man?" Hepburn spoke to Lucy.

"Why—" The question startled her.

"Have you seen him today?"

"No."

"Have you seen him tonight?"

"No. I haven't seen him in a week at least. I just don't remember when I saw him last. You don't mean—" Her voice was suddenly a thing of shreds and tatters. "—You don't mean you think he came here with me?"

"I might have had some such idea in mind," Hepburn said.

"Jack!" Tom spoke.

"I've just got a suspicious nature," Hepburn said apologetically. "This man worked for her husband. It's sort of customary for wives to stick by their husbands. I thought— But I was wrong, and I'm saying I'm sorry."

"It's all right," Tom Crenshaw said slowly. "Maybe it wasn't a nice question but you had a right to ask it."

"I don't see why Max sent—sent Pedro here to shoot at you," Lucy spoke.

"You don't?" Tom said.

"No, I don't. Oh, I admit Pedro worked for Max and I think there's no doubt Max sent him but I don't see why unless it was because of me. Was that the reason? Was he afraid he would lose me if you came back here?"

"That might have been part of it," Tom Crenshaw said. "But mostly I think he was just trying to scare us off. A lot of people will run when bullets start popping. Max probably thought we'd run too—"

"Tom! Jack!" Roy Briscoe was calling again.

Jack Hepburn stood up. "Here we are, Roy," he answered.

Briscoe came quickly toward them. "Jean—" he babbled. "That bullet—"

"No!" Tom Crenshaw gasped.

"But it did," Briscoe repeated. "It hit her. I can't tell how bad she's hurt—"

As they ran toward the tent none of them noticed that Maikop Valley was beginning to lighten with the glow of coming dawn. And none of them heard, in that dawn light, the far-off rumble of galloping horses.

JEAN BRISCOE was sitting on the edge of a cot. A lantern hanging

from the tent pole revealed a rough bandage around her right arm.

"The bullet went through her arm and into her chest," Roy Briscoe dazedly whispered. "I've got to get a doctor out here quick!"

She looked up as they entered the tent.

"I've got it," she said.

"What?" her husband whispered.

"The bullet," she explained. "It was just under the skin. I pressed on the flesh and it popped out. All I need is another bandage to stop the bleeding."

"Here. Let me help you." Lucy pushed past the men and knelt beside the cot. "You poor dear," she whispered.

"Who is this woman?" Roy Briscoe spoke. "Where did she come from?"

"Mrs. Hoffman," Hepburn said.

"What—"

"She's all right. Let her be."

Lucy had completed a quick examination of Jean Briscoe's side. She looked up. "Get me some water. And something to make bandages out of. A sheet, a white petticoat, anything. We've got to get this bleeding stopped."

"I'll get the water," Tom said. He lifted the canteen from the wire hook on the center pole of the tent. It was empty. He shook it. "Hello. Here's where the bullet went first."

There was a hole clear through the canteen. The metal cover and the water had absorbed most of the impact of the lead slug. Roy Briscoe took the canteen from Tom's hands, looked wonderingly at it.

"I still want some water," Lucy spoke.

There was a big tank of water on the back end of one of the wagons. Taking a wash basin, Tom went outside to fill it. The second he stepped outside the tent, he forgot all about the water.

Dawn was coming.

He could hear horses galloping.

Horses galloping in Maikop Valley! As he listened, the sound grew a little louder.

"Jack!" he called sharply.

Hepburn was instantly at his side.

"Hear that!"

"I hear it," Hepburn said. He glanced toward the tent. "Where did she say her husband went?"

"Home. He left with her parents and went back to the Double H."

"He isn't home now, I'll bet. Oh oh! They've stopped."

The sound of galloping horses had died into silence.

"They figure to sneak up on us on foot and knock us off while we're still asleep. It's plain, simple murder!" Hepburn's voice was shaking with anger. "And are we going to give them a surprise! Begin pulling that heavy timber out of the wagons while I get Roy and the women out here."

Many a time in the old west a wagon train had gone into a circle to fight off Indians. There weren't any Indians out there now—unless the Double H was carrying some more breeds of Pedro's caliber on its pay roll—and they didn't have enough wagons to make a circle, but they had two wagons full of sawed lumber including two by four and two by six timbers. The well-digging machine and the windmills, extension rods, and vanes were also in the wagons.

While Jack Hepburn went back into the tent Tom Crenshaw ran to the wagons. Working as quietly as possible, he began to pile lumber on the ground. He piled it in the form of a square.

"This is it!" he kept thinking.

THE sun was still below the rim of the mountains but the valley was

beginning to lighten ever so slightly. The cottonwoods had lost some of the black bulky shape they assumed at night and had begun to look like trees instead of shadows. A thin, almost intangible mist was hugging the ground.

"This is it! This is it!"

The sound of the horses did not come again.

Jack Hepburn and Roy Briscoe came swiftly out of the tent. They were carrying Jean in a packsaddle made of their hands. Lucy followed them. As she ran, she was tearing strips from a sheet.

"Right here."

They sat on the ground inside the square of timber he was erecting. Lucy dropped beside her and checked the bandage around her chest.

"Lie down on the ground, Jean," Tom said. "Roy, get a shovel and start digging. Jack, help me pull some more of this lumber out of the wagons."

They worked like fools. The lumber was piled six inches high. Inside the lumber, Roy Briscoe, working like some huge badger, was throwing dirt in every direction. He made a trench for his wife, gently helped her into it.

"Lie down, honey. Lie down, Jean. Everything is goin' to be all right, baby," Roy soothed.

She smiled at him. "Sure it will, Roy."

Jack Hepburn cursed under his breath. "I hate for her to have to go through this."

Jean Briscoe heard him. "I'm with Roy," she reproved. "That's all I ask."

Lucy watched the preparations for defense with frantic eyes. "I just can't believe it!" she said. "It doesn't seem possible that we would be here getting ready to fight for our lives."

"You lie down on the ground and keep your head down," Tom Crenshaw said. "Maybe we won't have to fight."

"You gone crazy?" Hepburn said.

"I was talking to her."

Tom climbed into the bed of the nearest wagon, looked, listened. The ground mist was a little thicker now. He could see nothing.

"Hear anything?" Hepburn whispered.

He shook his head and dropped back to the ground. "But it won't be long now. In case they've spotted us, I think we had better get down behind the timber and wait and see what happens."

"You're just about right," Hepburn agreed. "I left a lantern burning in the tent. Maybe I better go put it out."

"No," Tom protested.

"But it's a natural target!"

"I know it is. Leave it burning. Lucy still doubts that Max Hoffman can be as bad as we say he is."

"Oh!" Hepburn said understandingly. "You're letting her prove something for herself, huh?"

"Sort of. Quiet now. Everybody be quiet. Not a sound."

He slid down behind the little barricade, stretched himself full length on the ground, gently eased the muzzle of his rifle across the top of the boards. Jack Hepburn and Roy Briscoe slid along the ground and lay beside him. Their rifles rested on top of the boards.

Jean and Lucy were silent. What were they thinking? Tom wondered. Jean, so quiet and serene, so accepting of whatever came whether it was good or bad; Lucy, so bewildered and confused, so startled and upset. What were they thinking here in this dawn?

FOR that matter, what was he thinking? He wasn't thinking anything. Or not very much. The time for thinking was past. He had thought and

thought and thought and his mind had gone round and round without getting anywhere. The woman he loved married to the man he hated! What could he do about that? He thought of Max Hoffman, shaking in his boots in his expensive buggy, squealing that he wasn't armed. He thought of Max Hoffman skulking out there somewhere in front of him, Max Hoffman creeping closer and closer, Max Hoffman with his killers, like Pedro. Max was armed now, you bet!

He thought of Lucy, who had never known the other side of her husband, who found it almost possible to believe that the man she had married was a liar and a killer. He was sorry for her, so very, very sorry for her. She must have suffered tremendous shocks this night, shocks that she would remember all the rest of her life.

He wondered what the rest of her life would be.

He didn't know. He had tried to think about that too and his thinking had become confused and without any result that he could see. He was glad that the time of thinking was over, glad even though he knew that within minutes he might have a bullet in him, he might be dead.

Crash!

Rifles roared in the dawn!

It was a ragged volley from seven or eight guns. The target was the tent.

Bullets ripped through the canvas. Glass tinkled as the lantern was struck.

Roy Briscoe swung his rifle to cover the flashes from the guns.

Tom grabbed his arm. "No."

Briscoe cursed at him. "But—"

"Wait. Let them think they've killed us. They'll come closer if they don't hear anything from us."

"Oh. We'll wait until they come out? Is that your idea?"

"Yes. Wait."

Briscoe let his rifle slide back to the top of the boards.

Behind him, Tom was aware that Lucy was sitting up. Jean lay unmoving in her trench, but Lucy was sitting up.

After the first volley, the rifles had begun to fire continuously. Somewhere off in the dawning a startled horse snorted. Drum fire rolled along the ground.

Bullets made a sieve of the tent. The canvas jerked and jumped under the impact of the slugs. The tent pole was struck and went down. The canvas collapsed.

Still the slugs continued to pour into the tent.

"Anybody sleeping in there would never know what hit him!" Jack Hepburn whispered.

"I've seen murder done but I've never seen anything as cold-blooded as this!" Roy Briscoe gritted.

Fire began to lick along the collapsed canvas. Oil from the lantern had been ignited from the burning wick. Little puffs of flame poked up into the quiet air.

They watched in silence.

BEHIND him, Tom could hear Lucy sobbing softly. Again he felt miserably sorry for her. She was paying a stiff price, here and now, for the things she had never known.

The rifle shots began to die down.

"Don't make a sound!" Tom hissed.

The light was improving. The trunks of the cottonwood trees were becoming more distinct.

The silence grew. Off there, men were watching, listening, wondering. Soon they would be coming to see.

"We got 'em, I guess!" a hoarse voice shouted. "That fire would chase 'em out if they was still alive."

Figures began to move among the

trees. They were indistinct, shadows of shadows. They darted from tree to tree. Always they came nearer to the burning tent.

Roy Briscoe and Jack Hepburn followed the shadows with their rifles.

"Wait!" Tom begged.

Another shadow was moving among the trees. It was a man. A big man in a gray hat with rolled edges.

Tom felt his hands begin to move along his rifle. That was Max Hoffman! Max Hoffman, with a gun in his hand. Max Hoffman coming to make certain Tom Crenshaw was dead. As he had made certain Tom's dad had been dead!

Jack Hepburn glanced upward at Tom.

"Max!" a voice shrilled. "Max!"

Whirling, Tom tried to grab her. She eluded him. Jerking away from him, she ran toward her husband.

"She's warning him!" Jack Hepburn screamed. "The tricky little— Wait, Tom!"

But Tom Crenshaw was on his feet. He was trying to catch Lucy.

She was running toward her husband.

She had a pistol in her hand.

"Lucy!"

She didn't seem to hear him.

Max Hoffman stood as if rooted to the ground. He recognized Lucy's voice. The shock of hearing it here must have paralyzed him completely. His wife, here!

For years he had lied to her, had kept her from knowing the truth about him. Now she had caught him with a gun in his hands, a gun he had used, coming to make certain it had been used effectively.

For Max Hoffman, that must have been a horrible moment.

"Lucy!" he gasped.

She stopped running.

"You lying murderer—"

Raising the pistol she was carrying, she shot at him.

The bullet missed. She couldn't have hit the side of a barn. The slug knocked dirt from the ground twenty feet to the right of its target. But Max Hoffman knew he had been shot at.

He jerked up the rifle in his hands.

Tom Crenshaw caught her then. He shoved her sprawling forward on her face. At the same instant he flung himself forward on the ground.

Hoffman's rifle spurted flame above them.

Lead coming from behind them tunneled holes in the air as Jack Hepburn and Roy Briscoe let go.

Guns roared behind him. In front of him, Max Hoffman shot again. From the trees to the right and the left, guns were roaring. And his own rifle was growing hot in his hands.

He saw Max Hoffman take the first startled step backward. He knew that Jack Hepburn and Roy Briscoe were still shooting. He knew his own gun was growing hot.

He saw Max Hoffman try to run. A bullet knocked one leg out from under him. He must already have had lead in his guts. Before he hit the ground, he had more lead in him.

After Hoffman hit the ground, he didn't even move.

TOM CRENSHAW feverishly plugged fresh shells into his rifle. Off in front of him, Lucy was trying to sit up. He yelled at her to lie down. He began to shoot at the rifle flashes coming from the trees. Behind him, Roy and Jack were knocking holes in the dawn with exploding guns.

A man fell out from behind a tree to sprawl flat on the ground. Another man tried to run. He had thought the mist and the thin light would protect

him. Bullets in a stream converged on him. He didn't get very far. But another man did get away.

Suddenly the guns were silent.

In that silence Tom Crenshaw could hear running feet. Hoffman's men, those who were still alive, were trying desperately to get to hell and gone away from this place. Roy and Jack, shooting again from the barricade, were encouraging them to run faster.

Then the guns stopped again. There was silence in the cottonwood grove. The running feet had gone out of hearing.

Tom Crenshaw crawled over to where Lucy was lying on the ground.

She sat up as he approached.

A pistol lay beside her.

He looked at the pistol, then at her. "You hit?"

She shook her head.

His eyes went back to the gun. "You tried to shoot him," he said. Of all the things that had happened, this one thing was the most startling. That this scared girl would have a gun in the first place, that she would try to use it, was beyond his imagination.

"I know," she said.

"Why?"

She looked up toward the wagons and the little barricade beside the wagons. "Jean is going to have a baby," she said.

"I know that. I don't see—"

"My husband sent a half-breed to shoot into the tent where Jean was sleeping. Maybe he didn't know she was there, maybe he told Pedro not to hit anything, maybe he was only trying to scare you. I don't know about these things. They don't make any difference anyhow. Max sent Pedro to shoot into the tent without knowing or caring whether or not a woman was there."

In the dawn her face was haggard. "He might have killed her. He might have killed a woman who is going to have a baby. He didn't care. After I had learned that, I would have killed him, if I could. After that, I knew he deserved to die."

Her face was pinched and pale. Overnight she had been jerked willy-nilly out of the false world in which she had lived, the hush-hush world of the over-protected woman, and had been kicked into the real world that she scarcely knew existed, the world of gun and club, the world of fire and murder and hate.

NEVER in her life had she even known that she possessed claws.

She had learned that fact this night. And had known instinctively what a woman's claws are for. As soon as she had seen Jean Briscoe with a bullet through her arm, she had known what her claws were for.

Tom Crenshaw swallowed. So much had been going on that he had only dimly sensed! So many things had been happening in this woman's heart that he had not known about! Jack Hepburn, with his questions, had seemed to sense them. But he had not. And there were other questions that had to be asked now. And he had to ask them. No one else could.

"But the gun," he said slowly. "Where did you get that?"

"I brought it with me," she said.

"Why?"

She faced his gaze without flinching. "I was going to shoot you," she said.

"What?" he gasped.

She nodded. "I thought you were lying when you said Max had killed your father and had tried to kill you. I thought I knew Max pretty well and I thought you were simply not telling the truth. When you threatened his life, I was frightened almost to death.

I knew you would kill him. I could see it on your face. I didn't think Max stood a chance against you. So the only thing I could think to do was to kill you before you killed Max."

"You!" he whispered. "You would have killed me!"

"No," she said. "I only thought I would. When I got here and talked to you, I knew I couldn't have done it. But you asked me and I'm telling you the truth: that's why I came here tonight. It was only when I saw Jean Briscoe that I knew how horribly mistaken I was. And then, when I saw Max, with a gun in his hand, coming toward the tent—well, I still had the gun—"

Her voice broke.

He could see the tears running down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Tom," she whispered. "I'm sorry I was so wrong about so many things."

"Forget it," he said. "I was wrong about you too. Most people are wrong most of the time. I don't blame you for anything."

"You don't?"

"How could I? You're the big reason I came back to Maitop Valley."

"Oh." The tears were going away now.

Roy Briscoe and Jack Hepburn came up, the latter winding a bandage around a bloody arm. They looked at Tom Crenshaw and Lucy Hoffman and said nothing. They went silently down through the cottonwood trees.

Silently he helped her to her feet.

Time would be needed, he knew, to un-do the effects of what had been done this night. Time would be needed to get the gun back in the holster again, to soothe over and abate the terrible tensions seething in both of them. But they had the time, now, and if she could smile just a little bit, and if he could grin, maybe they could get the job done.

Time, and a little smile, and maybe a grin.

And she was smiling, smiling through tears. He didn't know where she found the courage to do it, but there was the ghost of a smile on her haggard face. He grinned back at her.

It was all either of them had left. It was, he knew, enough.

THE END

★ SOME COWBOY LINGO ★

By MILDRED MURDOCH

PUNCHER—One who herded cattle. The word was probably derived from the metal-pointed goad occasionally used for stimulating cattle when they were being urged to board railway cars.

Bronco—From the Spanish word meaning rough or rude. A bronco was a Western cow pony, but the term was most often used to denote the wilder of these, and those which seemed to have a mean nature.

Grubstake—The cowboy's food supply.

Locoed—A horse, steer or cow which seemed to be mentally deranged and would viciously attack another animal or a mounted man without warning was said to be "locoed." Often the condition was caused by feeding upon toxic plants, called "loco weeds." The word loco is the Spanish word meaning mad.

Crowhop—A horse which jumped about with arched back and stiffened knees was said to be "crowhopping." It was a comparatively mild form of bucking, and any competent horseman could sit through it; whereas real bucking was apt to throw the best of them.

Remuda—The group of extra ponies kept on hand at round-up corrals. Cowboys worked at such a fast pace during round-up time that they needed frequent changes of mounts.

Creasing—Shooting through the neck of a wild or excessively unruly horse in such a way as to touch but not injure the cartilage above the bones. This would completely though temporarily stun the animal and it could be brought under control. It was a dangerous practice, however, as unless done with the greatest of skill might result in killing or seriously injuring the horse.

THE sharp voices were followed instantly by the quick scrape of feet and the padded crunching sound that Mark Nearing knew all too well as that of bare knuckles on human flesh. Mark came through the archway separating the hardware and grocery sections, obliquely noting that Alberta London had grown tense and deathly pale, and at the store's big double doors he halted again. The brief impulse of protest drained from his heart, and the muscles of his tall, slender body went slack and toneless.

It was raining hard, and in the heavy downpour on the sidewalk Bull Tabor was methodically knocking down the Cray Creek nester each time that puny, frightened individual managed to stagger to his feet. He stopped it at last, and from a slack sprawl on the wet boards the nester grated defiantly:

"You can whip me, Tabor, and keep whipping me, but by hell I'm trading where I please."

The immense Tabor, who was still bent menacingly, laughed shortly. "Who said anything about where you trade, Mumford? That was just a little lesson in manners. After this, don't cross in front of your betters when you meet 'em on the sidewalk." It was obvious that the man was drunk and had been spoiling for a chance to vent his poisonous nature. Tabor cast a brief, insolent glance toward the store's interior and lumbered on down street.

For an instant Mark could feel Alberta London's contemptuous eyes upon himself, and avoiding her gaze he opened the door and stepped outside. Mumford climbed to his feet. His team and wagon was angled out from the store's hitch rail, and he turned toward it.

"What touched that off?" Mark asked harshly.

Mumford bent puffed lips into the semblance of a smile. "I didn't notice the jigger and crossed in front of him so he had to stop. That was his excuse, Mark, not his reason." The nester grinned at Alberta, who had come to the door and opened it. "I can only speak for the folks up Gray Creek way, Miss, but it'll take more than a fist whippin' now and then to stop us from trading with you."

There was concern and a hint of despair in the girl's fine grey eyes, and her pretty, heartlike face was blanched, though she kept the shoulders of her slim, lithe body back. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate it, Mr. Mumford. You people deserve a square deal, and I'm trying to give it. But sometimes I'm afraid they're just too

A huge boulder blocked the way

MOUNTAIN ROAD TO RUIN

by Giff Cheshire

There was potential ruin on that mountain road, and it was of two kinds—unscrupulous men, and scrupulous nature!

strong for me. Eric Parnell has that low Bull Tabor to do his dirty work for him. I haven't anybody to fight it off."

Cold shame was creeping through Mark Nearing, and he knew the remark had been designed for his ears. The nester untied his team and secured the halter ropes. "You've got more than you think mebbe, Miss London," he said, and turned to mount the front wheel to the rain-pooled driver's seat.

MARK came back into the store and looked at the girl with quizzical, abashed eyes. "All right. I did nothing to help Mumford. I stood here and watched it with my tail between my legs and my yellow streak shining like a light. It was my place to take a hand. In spite of what he said, Bull Tabor beat up Mumford for doing his trading in your store instead of Eric Parnell's. I'm your hired man, and I just watched it." Alberta started to speak, but he moved off toward the wareroom, grabbed a broom angrily and began sweeping up.

He was cursing himself, in spite of his stony exterior. He had not always been this cringing coward, not until the day he tried to sneak a ride from River Junction to this little backwoods town of Benchley on one of Bull Tabor's freight wagons. Drifting with no greater purpose than to see some country, Mark had reached the river town on a little steam packet. Wanting to move west, he had spotted a chance to crawl under the tarps covering the freight wagon. He had rattled and bounced the eighteen miles across the High Pass, then here in Benchley Bull Tabor himself had discovered him before he could get away.

Mark Nearing had put up a fight. He had sailed into it with all the steam and nerve natural to a healthy young man of twenty-two. But the beating he had taken had far surpassed anything in his experience. Outweighing him by twenty pounds and versed in every dirty tactic, Tabor had not been satisfied with stretching Mark out three times in swift succession. He had moved in with his boot and stomped, he had lifted Mark's sagging body, supporting him, only to knock him sprawling again. He had left Mark nearly dead.

Ford London, Alberta's father, had been alive then, trying to run his struggling little store in competition to Parnell. He had helped Mark into the quarters behind the store and poured him half a water glass of whiskey. A distinguished looking, grey-haired man, London had said, "Any man that runs afoul of Bull Tabor is my concern, son." Two days after that Ford London had been killed when the freight wagon he was bringing back from River Junction, with supplies for his store, accidentally skidded off the High Pass grade and toppled into Tricorne Lake, drowning its driver.

Everyone called it an accident, but few believed that privately. Though only circumstantial evidence supported the belief, Mark knew in his heart that it had been murder. For twenty years Eric Parnell had dominated this little Benchley town. He ran the big general mercantile, the saloon, and a large cattle spread adjoining the town. Freighting in the valley's supplies to be handled at jacked-up prices through his store and hauling out most of the market produce beyond the cattle that could be driven, he had a strong and profitable grip on the section. He used his business hold to benefit his cattle operations and the reverse, so he had not cottoned to the idea when Ford London arrived to open his own store. London had done his own hauling, and he had

tried to make his prices fair, so had won considerable support. Then Parnell had opened the drive to run him out of business.

Since London's death, Mark had been helping in the store and doing the freighting, with one of the weekly trips to River Junction scheduled for the next day. It was a prospect he dreaded, for he knew that Bull Tabor, Parnell's top tough, was laying for him now as he had probably laid for Ford London. Finished with tidying up the storeroom, Mark questioned his good sense in staying here. It was certainly not his affair to the extent where he was obliged to risk his life. Yet bonds as unbreakable as duty held him. There was a debt of gratitude to Ford London for befriending him, there was a feeling that was a torture in his heart for Alberta, and the contempt of him so frequently in her eyes, which he shared with her.

Yet resentment was in him. Had he gunned it out immediately with Bull Tabor after that fateful fist fight, he told himself, he might have come out all right. But he hadn't done it, and each day he had postponed the task had set the fear deeper in him. Now it was too late. He was spooked, and that was all there was to it.

Mark readied his wagon that night, greasing the axles and loading up the crated eggs, the two vealed calves and the green cowhides he had to haul out, covering the whole with a tarpaulin. He had fixed up a feed bin in the barn behind the store for his own room, and that night he was sleepless, with uncertainty and apprehension and bewilderment turning in his mind.

He went to the living quarters behind the store for breakfast, making an early start for the daylight-to-dark haul. Alberta was quiet, and when he had finished eating, she said, "I'm sorry the way I talked yesterday, Mark."

He could not meet her eyes. "You have no reason to be."

"I have, Mark. I know that you've stayed on here only out of consideration for me. I do appreciate it. And I understand. You mustn't blame yourself like you do. Sometimes things happen to a person's nerves that he can't help. You were foully treated, and it's got you now. But all of a sudden you're going to snap out of it, Mark. I know. I said what I did to hurt, and not because I believed it."

He rose, staring at her, the bleak hardness of his face softening a little. Her eyes were shining, and he saw there what he had longed for but never hoped to see. He could not claim that feeling; it would be degrading to both of them under the circumstances. He turned quickly toward the door. "I'll see you tomorrow evening."

"Yes, Mark."

A SMALL warmth was in him as he tooled the high-wheeled wagon out of Benchley and across the flat toward the mountain, but it left him abruptly when he passed Clint Mumford's place on Cray Creek and remembered his shameful act of yesterday. The mucky road touched Tricorne Lake and looped around it to the left, beginning to climb the grade. Two hours under way he came to Hairpin Turn, a place where the wagon road climbed around a sheer bluff forty feet above the water. It was in making this turn that Ford London's wagon had skidded in the gumbo, coming down with locked hind wheels, and had gone over, rolling and tumbling into the deep water at the base.

Mark shuddered and kept his eyes fixed on the wet rumps of the team until he had passed beyond. He nooned on the High Pass summit, eating a cold

lunch and feeding the two horses from nosebags. Then came the rumbling, rolling, sliding descent to the far valley, and Mark's tension eased as he cut across the floor to River Junction.

He reached there in the dusk and delivered his two dressed veal and the eggs to a local produce house, then drove on to the river terminal to load the freight for London's store in Benchley. He backed his wagon in to the loading platform beside a larger Parnell outfit that was already parked there. Mark knew that it had left Benchley slightly ahead of him, that morning, but he had not seen it all day because it was double spanned and traveled faster than he did. The teamster, Lafe Udell, stared at him in the freight house, but said nothing. Mark looked over the numerous boxes, crates, bags and barrels under the London waybill and began to figure out his load. By the time he had started trucking it out to the wagon, the Parnell outfit had pulled away.

It was seven o'clock by the time Mark finished loading and had battened down his tarps. A freight handler with a lantern came out to help him, toward the last, wanting to lock up for the night. He stood on the ground, holding the light for Mark, and suddenly he swore. "Hey, Nearing, you've lost the nut off an axle!"

Mark dropped to the ground. The yellow lantern light revealed that the big bull nut holding the left rear wheel onto the axle was gone. Mark scanned the ground in the vicinity. It could not have worked off by itself without spilling the wagon within ten feet. Somebody had removed it, probably hoping to upset his loaded wagon, forcing him to unload to replace the wheel. He remembered the Parnell wagon that had been parked beside his earlier, anger going through him.

He grunted, "Well, go ahead and lock up, Fred. I don't have a spare. I'll have to see if I can scare up one at a hardware store."

"Stores're all closed by now. So's the blacksmith shop. Looks like you're stuck, fella, until morning."

That would likely be true and Mark muttered a quick oath to himself. This was only a harassing tactic, yet it would give him a late start the next morning. He unhitched the team and drove it to the livery he regularly used and put it up for the night, his uneasiness refusing to leave him. Usually he drove the loaded wagon into the yard next to the livery for the night, as did the other freighters, where the night hostler could keep an eye on it. He was certain that Lafe Udell, Parnell's teamster, had removed the axle nut. It could be that he had done so to force Mark to leave the loaded wagon down on the dark street by the terminal, planning to tamper with or steal the load as part of the campaign of attrition against Alberta London's store.

He lacked bedding beyond the old saddle blankets he used as a lap robe, but when he had eaten Mark returned to the wagon and crawled under the canvas to sleep in the bitter cold, his worry increasing.

HE SLEPT lightly and was up at dawn, chaffing at the fact that he would have to wait at least until eight o'clock to find one of the hardwares open. He stamped the chill from his bones as he moved down the street toward the livery to grain his horses, and afterward he found an early opening restaurant and ate his breakfast. He was waiting on the sidewalk in front of the biggest hardware store when a clerk came along to unlock it. The man shook his head when Mark made known his need.

"What the devil's happening to everybody's axles?" the clerk grunted. "One of Parnell's men was in yesterday and bought up all we had. Claimed they wanted to carry plenty of spares with the roads as rough as they are."

It was the same at the other stores and the blacksmith shop. "Best I can do is make you one," the smithy announced. "Take an hour or so."

"Have at it, then," Mark replied. Uneasiness had left him by now, replaced by mounting anger. If Lafe Udell and his swamper had gone to all that trouble to cause the London wagon two or three hours delay, maybe they had earned a laugh, but he didn't like it.

It was ten o'clock by the time Mark was on the road, yet the only foreseeable consequences of the delay would be that he would be caught in the High Pass twists by darkness. Too thoughtful a teamster to ease his anxiety by overcrowding his team, he hunched his shoulders stoically against the cold, sweeping rain that resumed around noon, and three o'clock, with little more than two hours of daylight left, he was moving up the High Pass grade. He crossed the summit in the dusk, rested and fed his horses there and gulped down his own cold food. He lighted the bull's-eye reflector lantern and hung it on the end of the tongue and started down.

It grew eerie in the high passes as full darkness gathered. The winter trail had long since been turned to gumbo that was as slick as grease. Rain whipped into the canyon in heavy, splattering drops, whirled by the wind that echoed hollowly through the ravines. Occasionally a rock would loosen from the wall above and come bounding down to stick in the gumbo or bounce off into the dark space below, and the incessant need for caution was all that kept Mark from relapsing into deep apathy.

Yet excitement began to rekindle in him as he crept down the grade and realized that Hairpin Turn was not far ahead. He recalled Ford London's accident there, reflecting that it had been on such a night as this. He asked himself again why he remained in a situation so humiliating and so hopeless and recalling Alberta's warm, understanding eyes the previous morning he knew the answer. He never would be able to run out on it, so he had to lick it. Yet this understanding did not give him illumination as to how he was to do it.

The mud-splattered reflector of the lantern cast fair light ahead, and Mark watched the rutted, hoofed-out gumbo continually, yet there were moments when driver and wagon were entirely helpless, when even brake-locked hind wheels slid along like a sled in snow. His hands were frozen, and in spite of his slicker and the storm cover over his lap, he was soaked to the skin in patches, and smoking had long since become impossible.

His body tensed as he started down the long straight grade that ended in the dangerous turn. He locked his brake blocks against the rims of the hind wheels, yet the heavy wagon kept moving fast enough that the horses' tugs were slack some of the time, and occasionally they tried to break into a dog trot. Yet there was little danger, in the sticky mire, of taking the corner with skidding speed, for even the bigger Yarnell wagons made it regularly. The wagon cut around the rugged outside turn, and abruptly Mark was on his feet, sawing at the reins.

THE lantern had illuminated the big rock that lay in the inside rut only a split second before the team shied

over and passed clear of it. Responding to Mark's sawing on the lines, the horses haunched back, but their sliding hoofs kept them from checking the steady forward movement. The right front wheel struck, canting over, the slewing wagon tongue throwing the horses sidewise. In an awful second Mark realized that the hind wheels were skewing toward the outer bank, then before he could gather it all, he sensed that the twisted front wheels were letting the heavy wagon tip over.

His boots slipped on the footboards as Mark tried to scramble clear. Then abruptly he was on the danger side of the center of gravity. In a frenzied contortion of his body, he heaved himself with all his strength to his left. He felt the wagon rolling swiftly from beneath his weight in that instant, then he was turning in space, without support, and an instant later his spinning body hit water with a jarring splash.

He went far beneath the surface and clawed out of his slicker in a reflex action of self-preservation. He brought himself up to air with powerful lunges, aware that the freezing lake water was washing over him in huge waves. He went under again and came up choking and spitting and clawing. Briefly he was aware that the collision with the boulder had caused the top-heavy wagon to skid and fold over, rolling off the narrow grade. The lake was deep enough that team and wagon would sink so that the hopelessly caught horses would drown. That was the way it had happened in Ford London's case.

Riding out the agitated roll of the cold water, Mark struck out for the high sheer bank, a sudden fury powering him. He saw now what had happened to Ford London, knowing also that his own mishap was not the result of coincidence. Somebody had rolled that boulder into the road, at the exact blind spot beyond the sharp turn where a wagon could not avoid striking it. He understood now that he had been delayed in River Junction to put him here in full night. Ford London had probably fought his careening rig to the last fraction of time, and so had been unable to clear himself from the overturning outfit as Mark had done. It was sheer murder, twice attempted and once accomplished.

Because of the bluff-like bank, Mark had to work his way two hundred yards to his left to find a place where he could crawl out of the water. His teeth were chattering and his breath heaving, but his burning rage kept him unaware of it. Crawling and stumbling, he made his way up to the road. There he halted, staring. He was around another sharp, inside turn from the fateful one, and a little lower. Over there someone had struck a match, held it briefly, then extinguished it.

Mark understood instantly that Parnell's men were hurriedly removing the boulder, rolling it on across the road and off the lip into the lake, before someone else could come along to discover it. Grateful now for the splattering rain and moaning wind, Mark sprinted in that direction.

He scrabbled up the inside bank a hundred feet from Hairpin Turn, but before he did so he bent and picked up a fist-sized rock from the muck.

The two slickered figures working swiftly at the turn were using a crowbar and shovel, trying to free the boulder that had been partly embedded in the gumbo. A voice Mark recognized as Bull Tabor's said tightly, "Get a wiggle on, Shorty. We'd look silly as hell if some horsebacker came up on us before we heard him." Tabor's companion, Mark understood, was Shorty Noyes, an Eric Parnell hardcase.

Mark crawled to a point directly above them, then slid silently through the undergrowth until he was on the rim of the cut-bank. He could see well enough now to make out each of the obscure figures, and without hesitating he tensed himself and sprang. He picked the slighter of the two figures as his target, and Shorty Noyes went down wtih a grunt under his weight. Mark swung the rock in his fist hard against Noyes' skull, repeated to make certain it was effective.

Bull Tabor swore and scrambled aside, but before he could reach the sixgun under his streaming slicker, Mark was diving toward him. Tabor was holding a short handled shovel in his hand, but he could not swing it before Mark was under it, the two bodies colliding with terrific impact. Tabor slipped in the gumbo, going back on his haunches, and Mark poured him with powerful punches.

TABOR let go the shovel and got to his feet, trying to protect his head with his arms. Mark knew that he had to keep him tied up, or the man would bring his gun into play. He surged in again, driving Tabor back and down once more. He had the advantage of having completely astonished the big man, and he meant to use it, and at the same time he realized that the last fear of Tabor had gone from him, being replaced with killing rage.

It was deadly and terrible as they rolled in the deep mud, struggled to their feet, ripped, tore and slugged with savage urgency. To Mark Nearing it had become a matter of self-vindication and, freed at last of his fear of this brute, he put his strength and efforts to surer purpose. Twice Tabor managed to roll on top of him, but each time Mark heaved him away. Several times they regained their treacherous footing and closed in, fists hammering mercilessly.

Tabor's breath at last began to take on the tone of tortured sobs. Knowing this, Mark began deliberately to plan his kill with a calmness that was almost detachment. He invited Tabor's foolhardy, frenzied flurries deliberately, weathering them, drawing them out. Then at last he surged forward, driving a hard shoulder against Tabor's soft breastbone, knocking the man sprawling. Mark pitched like a javelin, landing on top of him, sending merciless chopping blows to the man's head. In a moment he felt the big figure grow slack beneath him.

Panting in whistling, tearing gasps Mark lashed Tabor's ankles and wrists together behind his back with the man's own belt, then did the same to Shorty Noyes, who had not moved from the spot where he had first fallen. Rain still swirled down upon them in heavy, spattering drops, and the chilling wind moaned through the canyons.

"But it won't wash out the marks of your work!" Mark grated aloud. "For you didn't get your chance to scratch out the tracks and ruts and skid marks so the rain could wear them down." Remembering the team and wagon that should be on this road, the place held an eerie emptiness for him. Leaving the bound men where they lay, Mark headed on down the road. He found two saddle horses a short way below the point where he had climbed out of the lake. He led one upgrade and ground-tied it with a heavy rock where it would stop any other rig coming down before it could hit the dangerous boulder, which he wanted to leave where it was for a while. He mounted the other and fifteen minutes later was rapping on the door of Clint Mumford, who lived in the first house

after the grade ran out on the flat.

Light that fell from the doorway, when the nester opened it, revealed a battered figure completely covered with soggy mud. "What in blazes, Nearing?"

"Need you for a witness, fella." Quickly Mark recounted what had happened. "I want you and your buckboard and a lantern. That rock's gotta be pried outta the way, and I want you to see it and the set-up before the rain washes off too much sign. I reckon we can hang Ford London's murderers, Clint."

"Nothing I'd like better!" A grin of deep relish broke on his scrawny face as the man seemed to recall Bull Tabor's treatment of him the day before.

The return trip in the buckboard was quickly made. By the light of a 'Dago lantern, which was a candle burning inside an open-end lard pail, Mark pointed out all the damning evidence for Clint Mumford to see. The crowbar and shovel laid where the murderous pair had dropped them, the scraping tracks where the wagon had skidded and rolled off the grade were still visible, the two pug-uglies still sprawled in the mud but were conscious now and cursing foully.

"Damn you, Nearing!" Tabor roared. "What's the meaning of this?"

"Just getting set for your hanging party, Tabor."

"A hell of a note!" Tabor blustered. "Here me an' Shorty was riding along in a hurry to get to River Junction, but we stopped to roll a boulder out of the road before somebody smacked into it! What's the idea bungin' us cold with rocks from the brush before we had any idea there was anybody around?"

MARK flicked the light over him, grinning at the mud smearing the man from head to foot. "Do you and Shorty always ride around with a shovel and crowbar tied to your saddle? I figured you had a good story to tell, in case somebody happened along to catch you. But how were you going to account for your tools? Or were you going to hide them if somebody come long?"

"I don't know what you're talking about or what you're rigging, Nearing, but I can tell you this. What ever it is, you're going to be sorry as hell you started it."

Some of Mark's elation at having uncovered the manner of Ford London's murder had left him by the time the buckboard reached Benchley. Tabor and Noyes were going to stick to the story that they had been trying to remove a dangerous rock they found in the road, disclaiming any idea of why Mark Nearing had jumped them, and Eric Parnell would throw all his powerful influence behind their claim. Mark knew that there would be only the fact that the London freight wagon had gone off the road, plus his own word and Clint Mumford's testimony as to how it had happened, to refute it. He began to question the ease with which the conviction he burned for could be achieved.

They stopped the buckboard short of Benchley and gagged the two trussed men lying in the back, and on Mark's instructions Mumford wheeled into town on a sidestreet and drove hurriedly to the dark loading platform behind the London store. Mark rapped lightly on the back door of the quarters, and when Alberta opened it she cried, "Mark! What happened to you?"

He grinned, and a new feeling was in him, devoid at last of self-recrimination and shame. "I lost you another wagon load of merchandise, Alberta, and the wagon and team. But we've

got the skunks who murdered your dad out here. Open the warehouse door, will you? We're going to lock 'em in there until we can get the sheriff."

The girl disappeared and presently the big door to the wareroom swung open. Without ceremony Mark and Mumford dragged their captives inside and closed the door quickly. Mark checked the bonds and gags.

"You're going to be a mite uncomfortable, boys, but not as much as Ford London and me were in the lake. You're lucky."

Tabor twisted his big body in protest, but was helpless. Mark followed Mumford out into the store and on into the kitchen, in the quarters. There he explained it to Alberta. "If Parnell gets wise to the fact that we're holding his killers here, he'll try to spring 'em. I'll sit guard on 'em tonight, and in the morning, Clint, you ride like blazes for the Junction and fetch the sheriff. You'll have to take the skunks' horses back out to your place and keep 'em until the sheriff's looked into it."

"You keep the lid on here, and I'll fetch the sheriff," Mumford promised, and left.

Alberta was looking worried. "I guess Parnell achieved results," she confessed wanely. "Once those goods were picked up at the terminal they were ours, and we'll have to pay for them, like we did the other load we lost. And I've been operating too close to margin to stand it, Mark."

Mark nodded soberly. "I know. I think that was the idea, more than to get rid of me. But if we can stick Bull Tabor with this, you'll probably have a good damage claim against Parnell. Maybe you can stall your wholesalers on the promise of that."

"I don't know, Mark. Somehow it scares me. Parnell's powerful and resourceful and ruthless. He'll be a hard man to beat." She smiled bravely. "I gather you settled your score with Bull Tabor."

Mark nodded. "And it gives me the right to tell you something, Alberta. Your scrap is my scrap, and I want it to be like that always."

She came into his arms, muddy as he was, her lips meeting his willingly and hungrily, then presently she said, "Then I'm not afraid of the worst that can happen." She tensed and whirled.

WITHOUT warning, the door opened and Eric Parnell came through. He held a gun in his hand, a big man in his middle fifties, with heavy cheeks and small, shrewd eyes. He was smiling coldly as he said, "I was down to the stable to see why the boys hadn't come in, Nearing. Seen your shadow on the blind. Also seen Clint Mumford larruping outta town with a couple of horses in my brand tied behind."

A wave of cold had run up Mark's back, but he met the deadly gaze with steady eyes. "Surprised to see me alive, eh?"

"Some." Parnell tensed. Bull Tabor had heard his voice and was beating boot-heels on the floor. Parnell grinned thinly. "Fetch 'em out, Nearing. There was aways a pretty good chance that you'd come through that accident, being a younger and tougher man than Ford London was. That's why I was on the alert. Your trouble's got you nowhere. We know what to do from here on."

With Parnell's gun in his back, and the girl forced to come along to prevent her trying a play of her own, Mark returned to the wareroom and removed the bindings from Bull Tabor and Shorty Noyes. The big Tabor climbed stiffly to his feet with sheer murderous rage burning in his eyes.

Parnell eyed them with contempt. "So you let a stringbean like Nearing hog-tie you!"

"He had help!" Tabor blazed. "That ringy little Clint Mumford!"

Parnell whistled soundlessly. "So Mumford knows about this."

"He does, and he's scatted, and he's got Nearing's orders to ride for the sheriff in the morning. Se we gotta stop him before he does, or goes blabbing his face to anybody else."

"We will."

Mark looked into Parnell's eyes and saw unrelieved cruelty there. "When a man starts murdering to cover up murder, Parnell, he usually gets to jumping faster than his feet can follow. You're bound to trip yourself."

"That depends on how smart a man is," Parnell snorted. "All I wanted was to tip that wagonload of merchandise into the lake, and I didn't give a damn whether you climbed out or not. Only, I didn't figure on you getting the jump on these two tough warthogs here."

"I'll fix the walloper!" Tabor grated.

His boss grinned, but the humor never spread beyond his mouth. "I'll handle it myself from here on to make sure there's no more slips." He studied Alberta with appraising eyes. "Hate to kill a woman, though. A pretty woman, that is. But I can't have you in my town, showing the country I could sell to it a lot cheaper than I have been all these years. So I reckon the smart thing is to get rid of you and your stringy clerk and your store, all at once. And Clint Mumford can thank you for costing him his life, Nearing."

"You leave Mumford alone!" Mark blazed.

"Not any, fella. He's a proddy little jigger, and he's tied into half a dozen of his beef growing neighbors for what he imagined was them stepping on his toes. He ain't liked in his vicinity. If he shows up full of lead, who's going to know which one of four or five done it, or if a whole bunch was in on it?" He glanced at Bull Tabor. "It'll have to be before morning, so you and Shorty better get set."

"It's what's going to happen to Nearing I'm interested in," Tabor growled.

"The store's going to be burned down. Too hot a flue, mebbe. Only a lot later than this to make sure nobody busts in on it too early. Then tomorrow they're going to find a lot of bones here. They'll be in the same room, and the country's going to be so full of the scandal nobody'll think to wonder how come the place burnt up."

MARK Nearing knew that these threats, delivered in a tone that was almost light and bantering, would be carried out with cold-blooded efficiency and he was weighing his chances. Looking like a living mummy from the mud caked all over him, Bull Tabor stood between him and the outside door, a deadly scowl on his battered face. The silent Shorty Noyes stood near Alberta, listening intently, his eyes alight with icy interest. Eric Parnell was closest to Mark, and he kept the sixgun in his heavy fist lined on Mark's belly. Knowing he and Alberta were completely cold-decked and that the odds would get no better, Mark figured his desperate play.

Knowing Parnell would not resort to gunfire, arousing the still wakeful town, unless he could not help it, Mark cut straight toward the man. The gleam of danger leaped into Parnell's eyes but he went back a pace. Both Shorty and Tabor sprang forward. Anticipating this, Mark dropped to his knees and plunged under the kitchen table, letting the other three collide in their frantic haste. He came out under

the end of the table and grabbed a chair, swinging it viciously.

Bull Tabor cursed as he caught a stinging blow on his upswept arm, and Shorty made a flying dive and caught Mark around the waist. Then Alberta had a chair and was smashing out with it with a desperation that equaled Mark's. She beat Shorty loose, and in the melee Eric Parnell could not have used his gun for other than a club even if he had no compunction against firing it. Parnell kept edging sidewise, trying to get a chance to cut down with the gun barrel. Then, as Mark danced clear of Tabor's smashing fists, Shorty Noyes reached out with a quick foot, tripping him, and in the same instant Parnell's gun barrel crashed down . . .

When Mark opened his eyes dizziness and nausea held him inert for a long while. Presently he tried to call softly, "Alberta!" but could not even hear his own voice. He tried again and again, but the darkness gave back only an empty silence. Concern for her helped him to fight off his own daze and weakness, but when at last he had strength enough to try to move he realized that he was trussed and gagged, which was why his efforts to call had been futile. The discovery cleared his head, and he tried to think.

The room was pitch dark, and he recalled Parnell's remark that the building would not be torched until the town was sound asleep, which meant that the action must have moved to Clint Mumford's. Mark's sense of responsibility for the man's plight tortured him. With effort, he managed to roll over onto his belly.

He tried desperately to mix coherent thought with the bursting pain in his skull. Waves of nausea ran through him, and at last his mind fixed upon a concrete, steadying thought. He was doubtless still in the kitchen, and the door opened off the hardware section of the store. Out there, if only he could reach it, was a display of single and double bitted axes standing bit down on the floor, the handles leaning against the counter. Forty or fifty feet from him. If he could manage to crawl that distance, trussed up as he was, he might be able to saw through the light line binding his wrists and ankles behind him.

He tried to move, but it seemed a hopeless thing, the effort driving excrutiating pain through him. By studying the points where his weight rested on the floor and using the minuscule body flexes permitted him, he managed to inch forward, not knowing if he was moving in the right direction. "Steady," he told himself. "Brains're better than sweat in a fix like this." He recalled slowly that the flooring throughout the building ran at right angles with the door he sought. He squirmed around parallel with the cracks and pivoted himself forward again, walking on cramped knees and shoulders and using his head to provide a general lift.

IT BECAME a frozen moment of ordeal in the sweep of time. After a sweating eternity he came against a wall and lay in mixed despair and anger, not knowing the location of the door or if he was against the inside or outside wall. He was sweating profusely now, and the cloth tied tightly over his mouth made his heavy breathing difficult and choking. He concentrated on that furiously, sliding the side of his head recklessly on the floor, trying to work it loose. After a moment his wet skin permitted slack enough to permit him to call, "Alberta! Alberta!" There was no answer.

They had taken her with them, Mark thought desperately. The thought powered him again, and abruptly he

bumped into the kitchen stove and knew that all his efforts had been in exactly the wrong direction. Thresh-ing rebelliously, he contracted a soft, warm figure on the floor to his left, and it moved in response to his touch. It dawned on him that the girl had also been gagged and could not answer him. Hope exploded in him. He had his mouth free now, and nudging her body with his chin he discovered that her back was toward him. She held her hands out as far as she could, and he went to work on the rope with his teeth.

It was slow, and he was forced to build only a rough picture of the knot in his mind, but after a long while he felt her hand twist and jerk away from him, and a second later Alberta had her gag removed and gasped, "I've got my hands loose, Mark!" She had freed her ankles in a minute, and then she untied him.

Mark lighted a lamp. The kitchen was a shambles, and the girl's dress and hair were disheveled but she smiled at him in triumph. "I heard you trying to move and prayed you'd come my way, Mark." He took her in his arms and kissed her.

"I've got to get to Clint Mumford. Lock the doors after me and sit with your gun. If the wrong people come back, fire enough shots to rouse the town."

Her face was grave, but she said bravely, "I'll be all right, Mark. Just take care of yourself."

He turned toward the door.

THE London draft horses were gone, and as Benchley had no commercial livery, Mark's mind was fixed on the Parnell barns and corrals at the edge of town. He was convinced that Parnell and both his henchmen had ridden to the attack on Clint Mumford, or himself and Alberta would not have been left without a guard. So there was apt to be no one but Pete Minote, Parnell's aged stableman who slept at the barns, in his way. Mark let his fingers unconsciously touch the handle of the six-gun he had picked up in his own sleeping quarters, then stepped into the shadowy recesses of the Parnell structures.

It had stopped raining, but the corrals were empty, which meant the horses were all stabled inside. Mark prowled through a side door soundlessly, alert for warning noise. He made his way down a long row of stalls, selected a horse as best he could in the darkness, and let it outside. With it still wearing the halter, he swung up bareback, and when it proved to be a gentled animal, he turned quietly across the muddy lot, and on the edge of town gigged it into top speed.

It was four miles to Clint Mumford's ranch, and a quarter of a mile short of it Mark turned from the main road, cutting across a seepy, summer-fallowed field and dropping into a sink. He followed a ravine until he had circled to the side of the ranch buildings opposite the road, slid down and there heard the first sound of gunfire, spaced, deliberate shooting that meant that Clint Mumford's house was under siege.

Once more Mark mused gratefully on the fact that his paralyzing cowardice of so many weeks had left him, leaving only the normal, manageable fear that wells in any man facing danger. He plucked his gun and stepped through a scattering of oak trees. Cursing the all concealing blackness of the night, he waited on the far side of the grove, hearing half a dozen more shots and fixing the locations of the orange colored streaks in his mind. He could spot only two attackers, one to his left, the other to his right. The third man was probably on the far side of the

house.

It was something that Clint Mumford was alive and putting up a cautious and effective scrap, firing only when the enemy invited it and biding his time between. Mark moved forward quietly, picking the man on his right for his first target, settled himself near a small brush clump and waited for a prompting streak of flame to show. It was a long moment in coming, and he fired instantly but could not know whether or not the shot had taken effect.

Though he had announced his entry into the fight, he did not draw fire at once. He scrambled off to his left, with the other man in mind, slid across a ditch and on the far bank waited again. The pause there was excrutiating, the enfolding blackness frought with mystery and lust and violence, hate and abrupt death. Each of the four or five men so concentrated waited for a card to fall, with none ready to open the play again. Mark found tension building to unbearable tightness in him and tried to shake it off to little avail.

Knowing the layout here, Mark figured that one man was among the locusts east of Mumford's house, the other in the outbuildings two-thirds around to the opposite side, with the third man, if Mumford had not already drilled him, being somewhere beyond the dwelling. It occurred to him that the one over there would not necessarily know of the entry of a new element into the fracas and so might make good material for a fast play. He began to edge in that direction, moving toward the man at whom he had just shot.

HE SWUNG wide of the locust stand, then cut in closer. This proximity and his gradually adjusting pupils let him make out the vague hulks of the several structures. Clint Mumford had a wife and small son in there, and Mark sympathized with the anxiety that must be in the man's heart, the sheer terror in the others, and a cold fury greater than his own concern rose in him. At that instant a gun exploded to his left, the muzzle flare showing simultaneously, and whirling Mark triggered bitterly. Then the sound of movement to his right wheeled him again, and he saw a form looming less than five feet from him, and Bull Tabor's heavy voice rasped:

"Drop the gun, Nearing! I've got you covered."

Realizing that it was so and unable to understand why he had not been shot down in his tracks, Mark obeyed. Tabor came forward swiftly, digging his pistol muzzle hard into Mark's back. "Over there toward that shed, bucko." A few steps farther and the big man sang out, "Hey, Parnell, Nearing got out here somehow. Hold your danged fire. I'm bringing him over."

Eric Parnell was forted in an open-sided machinery shed, and as the others strode up he demanded gruffly, "Why didn't you drill the son?"

Tabor laughed harshly. "Because we've got a better use for him. That ringy Mumford might stand us off till morning, and he's got to be dead before this vicinity gets to stirring again." He lifted his heavy, carrying voice. "Hey, Mumford, we got your friend Nearing. Light a lamp, then come out with your hands over your head or we'll cut a window in his onery skull."

"Don't do it, Clint!" Mark ripped out. "They'd kill us both, anyhow!"

Instantly he realized his mistake. Had he kept still, Mumford might have thought it a trick and refused to obey. Now he knew that Mark Nearing was outside, in Parnell's hands. He would obey, hoping for a break in the play-

out, which was what Mark knew he would do himself in the same circumstances. Tabor chuckled and grunted, "Thanks, bucko."

After a long moment a match flared inside, then the steadier light of an oil lamp came on. Mark's heart sank, and he censored himself bitterly. Had he remained forted there, Mumford might well have stood off the siege until daylight, when Parnell's bunch would have been forced to retreat. Mark groaned as the kitchen door opened and Mumford stood there with his hands in the air.

"Stay where you are," Tabor yelled. "We're coming in for a powwow. You two gents show sense, and mebbe we can make a deal for you to drift and save us the killing." He shoved Mark forward into the kitchen, with Parnell and Shorty Noyes following.

There was blood on Clint Mumford's face from a light scalp wound, and Mark saw that all the kitchen windows had been knocked out. None of Parnell's bunch seemed to have been scratched. There was no sign of the woman and six-year old boy.

Tabor noted this fact. "Where's the family?"

Mumford's face showed strain, but in his level eyes there was only cold fury and contempt. "I made them go down in the cellar. It's a good thing I hedged against something slipping. I decided to keep a watch until it got light enough I could leave the family and go fetch the sheriff. What's your deal, Tabor?"

"Just this. Pack your family into your wagon and get going before daylight taking Nearing with you, and you can live—if you don't ever come back."

Mumford nodded. "That'd suit your purpose just as well, leaving Alberta London defenseless and making sure you don't have to face that murder charge. I reckon you're acting in good faith, Tabor. I don't like it, but I gotta think about my family." He looked at Mark. "I'm ready, if you are."

Mark veiled the astonishment that had leaped into his eyes. This did not square with the spunky little man who had taken Bull Tabor's beating so recently in Benchley only to hurl defiance at his tormentor. Tabor was too thick headed to see that, and Eric Parnell and Shorty Noyes seemed to be also. Satisfaction had crept into the faces of all three. They thought they were going to win an easy victory. Assured that Mumford had something up his sleeve, Mark nodded in mock surrender.

"I reckon it's the only thing, Clint. I had my satisfaction whipping that big gorilla. It was about all I was hanging around for."

Eric Parnell spoke then, much of the tension gone from his voice. "You're showing sense. Shorty, go hitch the nester's team. We'll see 'em as far as we can get 'em before daylight."

SHORTY turned out through the kitchen door. Bull Tabor was stroking his stubby chin, a grin of self-satisfaction on his face, but his right hand still held a gun. Parnell dropped into a kitchen chair as if in fatigue, his staring eyes going from one to another. Mumford batted Mark a quick wink, and Mark was certain then that it was with design that Mumford had so quickly accepted the truce offer.

It was the look of crafty satisfaction in Bull Tabor's beady eyes that warned Mark. The man was a horrible sight, his heavy face showing the beating Mark had given him, his clothing still smeared with mud. Bull Tabor wanted more out of this than had been offered. Mark knew that should they take the

unthinkable choice of lighting a shuck, none of them would be allowed to live beyond the first good site for a slaughter. This was Tabor's design to gain his ends with minimum risk to himself and friends, growing out of the fact that Clint Mumford had proved himself a hard man to knock off in a siege.

Uneasiness was in Mark, for he had no inkling of what Clint was up to, but he knew that Mumford had given him that wink to prepare him for action when it came. When Shorty Noyes had been given time to get down to the barn and well away from the house, Mumford laughed harshly and said:

"Parnell, I put that chair in that exact spot, hoping somebody'd set in it, and I reckon Heaven made it you. Like I told you, my wife's down cellar. I forgot to mention that she has a high powered rifle and she's got it trained on the ceiling smack under you. If I rap a boot heel on the floor or anybody shoots or gets rough, she's pulling the trigger. And you'll have a steel-jacketed slug in your pants and tearing up through your guts."

For an instant Parnell looked incredulous, but the expression was quickly wiped off by a sick, stricken look. He started to rise from the chair, and at the same time Mumford lifted a foot as if to give the fatal rap, and Parnell sank back. Bull Tabor was staring, the amusement shocked off his heavy face.

Mark was beginning to see the design, for a curtain had moved slightly behind the man, and he grinned at Tabor. "What do you care what happens to Parnell, Bull, when you're going to stretch hemp if you let us live? Why don't you play it out on your own, Bull?"

"Damn you, Bull, don't you start nothing!" Parnell roared.

Bull Tabor seemed tempted. He had kept his sixgun in his hand but not lined on any particular individual, and his mental struggle was all recorded in his eyes. Parnell read the portent and was white and wilted in his chair, and Mark could see his muscles tensing so he could make a fast move if Tabor went into action.

Tabor had two unarmed targets before him and was not himself risked in the deadlock, and the temptation was too much for him. His thumb eared back the hammer, and at that point a rocking explosion filled the room. With an agonized bleat Eric Parnell rolled out of his chair and scrambled sideways, and Mark pitched himself toward him.

The curtain cutting off the pantry from the kitchen had brushed aside, and only Mark and Clint Mumford had seen the barrel of a scatter gun thrust through. It had been ready when Tabor made his play, and now the big man lay in a pool of blood on the floor. A white lipped, firm jawed woman stepped out, her eyes avoiding the sight. Grabbing the sixgun that had dropped from Tabor's hand, Mumford sprinted through the kitchen door.

PARNELL was fighting desperately to throw off Mark's crushing weight and scramble to his feet. Mark fought in the same swift determination to prevent Parnell's clawing out the gun he had returned to its holster. Parnell gave it up and began swinging his fists. Remembering all that himself and so many others had suffered from the man, Mark beat his half-bald head on the floor until he lay still. Grabbing the gun, Mark whirled out into the yard.

He guessed that Clint was already stalking Shorty Noyes, who would have been warned by the outburst in the house. A gun exploded in that direc-

tion, and Mark saw flame streak across the barn door. Clint answered it, and alternating arrows of fire punctuated the night. Abruptly Mumford's gun was stilled.

Mark raced forward, singing, "Here, Noyes!" Flame stabbed at him, and he triggered just once. There was no more firing, and for an instant he did not know whether he had stopped Noyes or if the man was reloading. He moved on into visual range and saw the still figure sprawled in front of the barn door. He paused there only long enough to extract the gun from the relaxed fingers, and toss it off into the black night. Then he found Clint and helped him back to the house.

Still looking grave and ill, Agnes Mumford was holding the scattergun on Eric Parnell.

"I'm glad we got you alive, Parnell," Mark grinned. "I still want to see somebody hang for Ford London's murder. And I want Alberta London to collect damages for the two loads of merchandise, the two wagons and teams you cost her. You might have discredited Clint's and my testimony about what happened at Hairpin Turn if you'd let it go at that. But with this attack on top of that, you're going to hang."

Eric Parnell seemed to realize it. The bluster had gone from his face. "I'll make everything right, boys!" he whined. "I never had any part in a murder. It was Bull Tabor and Shorty Noyes."

"At your orders," said Clint Mumford in disgust. "So shut up."

Mark tied Parnell up, and at last Agnes Mumford put down the shotgun and sank weakly into a chair. Mark started a fire in the stove to heat water to dress Clint's light shoulder wound and the older one on his scalp. With it going, he looked at the woman in admiration.

"Three things tipped me off to the play," he remarked. "The first was the quick way Clint seemed to knuckle down, when I knew how he usually plays things. The second was when he said you and Dicky was down in the cellar, when I knew that didn't sound like Agnes Mumford. The third was when I seen that pantry curtain move. So I was set to grab Parnell."

Mumford grinned and began to roll a smoke, but his shoulder was so lame he gave it up. Mark took the makings and started to fix it for him.

"They fell for it," Mumford said, "because it seemed entirely reasonable I'd get my family down there out of harm's way. Which is what I tried to do, but you know Agnes. When I come home and told her there might be trouble, I couldn't get her to take Dicky and stay over at the neighbor's. But she did take Dicky over and come back. When they offered the truce, we fixed up the play. She helped me stand 'em off, Mark. She's a real frontier wife."

"You can say that for me, too!" Mark breathed.

Mark was thinking about that an hour later as he rode back through the black night to Benchley toward another real frontier woman. Eric Parnell was locked in Mumford's granary, waiting for the sheriff to come after him, still alive to make good the damage he had done Alberta through cash and through hanging. Yet these things were only idly in Mark's mind, as he thought of the girl he had won the right to claim. He knew now that come what may he would never be held in fear's cold grip again for he had learned a simple but important truth—the fact that fear loses its grip when a man starts himself in the thing that he must do.

THE END

THE INDIAN SWASTIKA

THERE is an important difference between the Nazi swastika and the swastika often found in old Indian pictographs. That is in the direction of the prongs which project from the cross. According to one old Indian chief, the Nazi swastika is evil, because the movement of the figure is against the movement of the sun. The Indian swastika moves sunwise, and to these people the path of that great power, the sun, is the way to all success and the good things of life. They walk around the fire sunwise to take their places. They pass their pipe sunwise around the circle. The sunwise, or as the white men call it, clockwise direction is followed in all their ritual.

The Indian swastika represents the world; rather the figure which we call a swastika is to them a spider web, symbolizing the world. Their wise men revered the spider, and because he spun his web out of himself, the creature became to them the symbol of the Creator, and the web, the created earth. In the Indian pictures, the web was made in the form of a square, with four lines running from the center to the corners, these lines forming a cross, the equal arms of which indicated the four directions. The prongs from the end of these lines were usually made in the form of otters or other aquatic animals, to suggest the waters that surround the land. The whole makes a pattern which became all too familiar to us these past few years—the swastika.—*A. Morris.*

HE'S SOLD HIS SADDLE

THE expression "He's sold his saddle" is western lingo meaning that something pretty bad has happened to a man. His saddle is one of the cowboy's most important, personal and cherished possessions. He chooses it carefully, to suit his individual taste, and it is usually very heavy, with a deep, comfortable seat, a strong horn and wide stirrups. As he breaks it in, the seat and skirts develop bumps and hollows until that particular saddle fits him better than anyone else. It becomes as individual and personal as a pair of comfortable old shoes. Once broken in, therefore, it becomes doubly valuable to him. In this seat on the back of a horse he spends most of his waking hours.

Should the cowboy become hard up, or involved in a losing game of gambling, he will throw in his six-shooter, his pet hat, all his money, and even his horse, but his circumstances will be desperate indeed before he will part with his saddle. From this attachment grew the phrase "He's sold his saddle," used with many connotations. It is said scornfully if a man has done something contemptible, such as betraying a friend; with pity, if a disaster like a fire takes all a man's belongings; sadly, if a friend's mind becomes deranged and he loses his mental powers. "He's sold his saddle" is one of the worst things that can befall a man of the cattle country.

—*Anthony B. Ottfried.*

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

By JAMES A. HINES

1. According to the Westerner's way of thinking, a "fence lifter" is: A man who steals? A very hard rain? A person who tears down your fence? A fellow who is crazy?
2. If an old-time Western friend of yours told you he was going after a "fizzy," you would know he was going after: A horse that limps? A part for a buckboard? His daughter who is arriving from the East? A range horse with a bushy tail?
3. What does the cowpuncher's slang term "fumadiddle," mean?
4. A fuste is: A person released from prison? A Mexican saddle? A well-broken horse? A Spanish term for a man who is deaf?
5. According to the cowpuncher's way of thinking, what is meant by "giggle tolk"?
6. If you had a horse of "grulla" color, you would have a horse of: A reddish-brown color? A bluish color? A mouse-colored horse? A horse of black color?
7. What is a hell stick?
8. *Juzgado* is the Spanish spelling of well-known word in the West?
9. How old would you say a "long yearlin'" calf is: Twenty-four months old? Eighteen months old? Three months old? Five months old?
10. If you had a "hog skin" saddle, you would have: A small eastern riding saddle? A saddle with no horn? A large cowboy type saddle? A saddle made in Mexico?
11. What is meant by the cowpuncher's slang term "cold blaze"?
12. What is a cuitan?
13. According to the Westerner's way of thinking, a "flannel mouth" person is: A person who has gone loco? A person who talks too much, a braggart? A person who has eaten some red pepper? A person who sits around and never says anything?
14. In a cowboy's lingo, what is a crow bait?
15. True or false? A churn head horse is a smart horse with lots of sense?
16. What does the western term "hair off of a dog," mean?
17. True or false? When a person goes "haywire," he is said to have gone crazy.
18. What is a brand inspector?
19. True or false. A brand artist is an expert at changing cattle brands.
20. According to the cowboy's way of thinking, a "choke strap" is: Another name for a saddle girth? A cowboy's necktie? The strap from his stetson? A hangman's rope?

(Answers on page 168)

BIG DOIN'S

by Berkeley Livingston

"Keep 'em elevated; I got itchy fingers!"

AT LITTLE FORK

"'BOUT time Linda Lou got hooked," Mrs. Murgatroyd said emphatically, her triple row of chins wagging in furious accompaniment to the words.

But Ben Hogson wasn't so sure.

"Mebbe," he said. "Now don't get me wrong. Linda Lou's as nice a girl as is in these parts. But Lafe Hamling . . . H'm!" there was disapproval in his tones.

Mrs. Murgatroyd shuttled back and forth in the over-sized rocker, Tom Weston, the only carpenter in Little Fork, had made for her, at a furious rate. Her rocking was a valid expression of her thoughts and feeling in the matter of Linda Lou's marriage.

"Now don't be an old maid, Ben!" she said sharply. "I'm not sayin' Lafe is an angel. The Lord knows he's done some things that ain't in the Good Book. But he's in love with the gal, and me, I'm a strong believer in love."

Ben was more practical-minded. "Sure. Love is a fine thing. Nothin' better, from what I hear. Only Lafe's been known to do some odd things, like pokerin' and fightin'. Things like that, when they're in a man's soul are

Yes, it was time for Linda Lou to get "hooked". She was old enough to marry, and to cause a lot of trouble!

hard to get out, love or not."

The plump features of the woman settled into more composed lines.

"That's it, Ben, love. She's got a mind of her own. I got me an idea that Lafe ain't gonna be spurred much, but the bit is gonna be rode a mite harder than he's used to."

"H'm. And speakin' of angels, there's one now," Ben said, shaking his head toward a girl walking on the shaddy side of the street directly across from the two-story frame that was Mrs. Murgatroyd's boarding house.

The woman smiled at sight of the girl. She thought back of her own girlhood in this wilderness, although Little Fork was no longer the rampaging town of a gold strike it had once been. Copper and silver had been found, and smelters had reared their stacks to the Arizona sky. But when she had first caught sight of the place, thirty years before, it was a town of false-fronts, saloons, and drunken, rowdy people. She knew all about love. It had changed Tim Murgatroyd from a brawling Irish rowdy to a stable and conservative man, and a good husband.

But there were other thoughts in the mind of Linda Lou Watkins as she moved on light-stepping, booted feet to the Silver Dollar Emporium.

First and foremost, there was the thought of Lafe Hamling, and their approaching marriage. Lafe should be well on his way home from Chicago, where he'd delivered Horton Wimple's stock. And in Lafe's pocket there should be four thousand dollars, which was his share of the proceeds from the sale. That four thousand, plus what her father was going to settle on her, was going to buy two thousand acres of choice land and a house. Lafe had the cattle, and her father was contributing a hundred head more. She should have felt wonderful.

But she didn't!

The more she thought of Lafe and the money he had, and the more she thought of the vast distance between Chicago and Little Fork, the darker became the cloud in her heart. Lafe loved poker.

Lafe Hamling loved poker!

Like at this very moment, when he had aces full and there were still three others in the pot. He looked at the bills on the table, looked again at his cards which showed a trey, a pair of sixes, and a nine, all in different suits, and knew he had the winning hand.

He had met the four of them on the train, the first hour out of Chicago. The club car was open and he felt the need of some beer. They were sitting around a card table playing gin, partners. There were others in the car, but only the four were playing cards. He gravitated to them like a dog to a tree.

One of them, a short, fat man, with red-face and purple-veined nose and eyes hidden behind leaden-colored folds of flesh, threw his cards up in disgust and bellowed:

"Gin! Damn the game! Ain't no meat in it. No wonder them Hollywood sissies play it. Let's play some real cards, poker."

"Okay by me," said another, whose cadaverous appearance and thin chest spoke of the tubercular or dying. "Only four-handed poker . . ."

"Sure," said the third, who was the youngest of the four. "Four hands don't make good sport."

The fourth man was silent.

"Well," Lafe said hesitantly. "If you won't mind a stranger . . .?"

"Hell, no," the fat man said. "Pull up a chair."

THE fat one's name was Jones. There was also a Smith, a Green

and the silent one's name was Gordon. They started playing dollar and two poker but after an hour one of them suggested five and ten. It was all right with the rest and certainly with Lafe. He didn't care what the stakes were, so long as it was money.

Now it was the second day. The game had gone on with desultory results for all, with only breaks for food and a nap for one or two. Lafe had played without sleep. Only an hour ago the conductor had passed through and informed Lafe, Douglas, the stop he wanted was a two hour ride off. It was then that Jones had suggested table stakes.

"You're a right nice feller," Jones had said. "What say we play real poker?"

Lafe had just about figured them out. The younger bet with reckless abandon. A pair was as good as a straight, as far as he was concerned. The death's head, played close to the belly. Green was a conservative. Only Jones played real poker.

"Sure. Okay with me," Lafe said.

"Then let's get some new decks," Jones said, and called to the porter to bring some.

His back was to the rest as he took the cards from the porter. He threw them on the table. They were marked with the name of the railroad they were riding. Lafe, whose turn it had been to deal, broke the seal of one of the decks and riffled the cards.

After an hour, Lafe was a hundred and fifty ahead. But it hadn't been exciting poker. Then it had come time for Green's deal, and Green broke the seal on another deck. They were playing dealer's choice. Green chose seven card stud.

Gordon was high on board with a king. He bet ten dollars. Lafe looked at his hole cards and saw a pair of bullets staring him in the face. There was a call all around until it came to him. He raised the pot fifty. Gordon called, but Jones, who was sitting on the other side of Gordon, kicked it another fifty. He had a ten showing. The others called and again Lafe kicked it fifty. This time Jones only called.

Nobody improved on the second card, and Gordon passed. But Jones bet a hundred. Lafe kicked it a hundred. There were three raises, the last for two hundred, and this time Lafe called. Jones might have three tens. Lafe's second card had been a nine. The third card brought a six to Lafe. Green now was high on board with a pair of jacks.

He checked.

The youngster looked at his face cards, and peeked into his hole cards. He had a four, a five and ace on board. Slowly he drew a pair of hundred dollar bills from the sender pile of his money, and shoved it over to the center of the table.

He didn't look up at the others, as he did so.

Death's head flicked his tongue across his lips, played with his hole cards and gave the youngster a tight look from under his lids, and shook his head as he upped the bet another two hundred. His cards showed nothing. Lafe called, but Jones' mouth opened wide in a huge grin as he said, "Ain't no time for short money. Bet your cards. I'm making it a thousand."

Green folded his cards, hooked his fingers into his suspenders and watched shallowly.

There was a tightness around the mouth and eyes of the youngster as he looked down at his cards. Lafe could almost see his mind work. Lafe knew the other had a straight. And from what he could see on board, the straight was high, higher than what he had . . .

Lafe looked to Gordon, the next bettor, who, as usual said nothing, but threw his money on the table. It was up to Lafe then.

Quickly, he figured how much he had left and how much the pot would go to before he was tapped. He called.

Once more the cards went around. Smith, the youngest of them, drew another trey; Jones, a jack; Gordon, a four; and Lafe, a six, which gave him a pair of sixes on board.

Green looked over to Jones, who was showing a jack, and checked. Jones checked, and it was up to Lafe. He looked out into space, as though receiving a message from above. His fingers stayed on the small pile of big bills in front of him. Slowly, he framed the word, "Check."

And Smith bet a hundred.

Gordon called but Jones made it five hundred. Lafe had the hand figured then, and the players. He made it a thousand and the kid called. Gordon rode it out and James made it another thousand. And Lafe called. It was the last card, then.

Lafe looked down at his cards while Green dealt. He looked up just as Green was dealing off the last two cards, and saw the man's lips frame the words, "Ace; Queen." The queen had gone to Gordon. The ace to Lafe's, and gave him aces full.

Gordon was high and checked. The kid started to put money in and changed his mind at the last second. Jones also checked. And Lafe shoved ten hundred dollar bills on the table.

Gordon called, as did the kid. But Jones grinned deeply into Lafe's eyes and made it two thousand. Lafe looked down at the money he had left and realized that if someone else raised, he would be tapped out . . . unless he dipped into Wimple's money.

Lafe called.

And Smith, the one who had the least on board, dipped into his trouser pocket and pulled out a handful of money, raised the bet another thousand. Gordon didn't bother looking at his hole cards. He placed his open cards face down and watched the three still in action. Jones made a sly face and called. And Lafe became aware of a strange thing. He had been aware of it for the last few seconds, but only subconsciously. Now the meaning of the words, either clairvoyant or for another reason, Green had used. He had read the cards.

But had the others also been able to? Lafe took out the envelope with Wimple's money, and stripped off two thousand dollar bills from the slender pile of bills in the envelope. He was aware of their eyes on him as he did so.

Jones shook his head, as though he had been concerned with a private thought, and called the last raise Lafe made, the thousand dollar one, with Wimple's money.

JONES won the pot with four tens. Smith had had his straight from the very beginning.

And as Green had called it, Lafe's last card had been an ace.

Lafe leaned back, shoved the pearl-grey Stetson to the back of his head, and allowed a small smile to play around his mouth. They either did not understand the meaning of the smile or had their own ideas of humor, for they smiled with him. All but Gordon, the silent one. His hands suddenly went under the table's edge.

"Nice goin' fellas," Lafe said. "There was about six three hundred in that roll I dropped. Guess you all don't make that kind of hay easy-like."

The purple-veined nose of the fat man called, Jones, blazed a deeper purple.

"What you mean?" he asked bellicosely.

"I think the words were plain enough," Lafe said.

They were all silent but in each of their eyes was a new-born wariness.

Lafe shoved himself away from the table. "Well," he drawled. "It was good sport while it lasted. Me, I ain't got no kick comin'. Only, sorry I got to get off, right soon. Maybe you'll visit with me some day, soon!"

"Where'd you say you're from?" Jones asked.

"Little Fork. It's about twenty mile southwest of Douglas. There's goin' to be big doin over to town this week. Old Timer's Rodeo. Lots of ready cash. Only they got *real* players. Not dopes, like me. . . ."

"Well, we was goin' down to Tuscon," Jones said. "Maybe, if we got time, we could stop by for a small session."

Nothing else was said until a few minutes later when they mumbled excuses of sorts and meandered into one of the other cars. All but Jones. He stopped at the door, turned and said:

"Yep. Could be we might stop off . . . Sucker."

ALREADY the town of Little Fork was in the last stages of preparation for the two days which were red-lettered for all its people. The bunting was up, each horse was curried and combed, saddles shone, and tow-heads and black ones washed and combed for the Saturday and Sunday of the Redeo. There was joy and happy faces all about. All about, except in the boarding house of Mrs. Murgatroyd.

There gloom reigned.

Mrs. Murgatroyd rocked in her rocker, Ben Hogson sat in his favorite seat close by the window, where he could see all who passed, and Lafe Hamling, a cloud of mixed anger and dejection on his face, sat facing the other two.

"So they was crooked gamblers, eh, Lafe?" Ben said.

"Wasn't much I could do about it," Lafe said. "An' it'd have been pretty hard proving what I thought. . . ."

But the woman's mind was bent in another direction.

"Linda Lou, now," she said. "I'm a mite surprised at the girl. Course you done wrong, Lafe. No gainsayin' that. But still. . . ."

"Oh! I can't blame her," Lafe said. "Matter of fact, I was surprised she didn't fuss more about it. Losin' Wimple's money that way. *He* didn't mind. Lord! Said I could pay it when I had it. But the whole idea of gamlin' and takin' a chance with someone else's money was pretty small punkin's. Yeah. She said if I had so little mind of somethin' like that, what would happen if somethin' really important came up? An' I had no proper answer for that."

But Ben was still on the game:

"An' you say they used the cards the porter brought?"

"Sure," Lafe said, reaching into his hip pocket and pulling the deck in question from it. "Don't know why, but I picked the bad-luck cards up and put them away for some fool reason."

"Let's see," Ben said reaching for them.

He studied them intently for a few minutes, then brought his gaze back to Lafe.

"An' only the porter handled these?" he asked.

"Well," Lafe said, "Jones took them from the porter. But he turned right around and threw them on the table. There were three decks all together."

"Uh, huh," Ben said. "Now bend close and I'll show you somethin'."

The man and women did as he ordered and looked with wondering eyes at the small bent man with the cards in his hands. The fingers were wrapped with loving care around the deck.

"Now look," Ben said again. "See that!" he pointed to the picture of the locomotive which was painted broadside on the card. "There. The first wheel."

They looked but they couldn't follow his meaning.

"No. Guess neither of you know what to look for. But if you'll look real close you'll see somethin' peculiar about that wheel. It's got thirteen spokes, an' each of those spokes got a little nick in it. That's to show what card it is. The suits is in the headlight. Now watch. I'm goin' to deal out a hand of stud. . . ."

And as he dealt, he called off each card. Nor did he miss once.

"You was right, Lafe," he said as he picked the cards up and shuffled them again. "They was crooked gamblers. One of them had this deck and maybe as many as they ordered, and when the time came for the sucker to be taken, they switched decks. Heck! You can buy these from a house in Chicago."

"Now that's right fine," Mrs. Murgatroyd said. "An' I suppose that makes everything just dandy with Linda Lou? You gonna run right over an' tell her, Lafe?"

LAFE'S face showed a deep bronze. He swallowed hastily.

"N-no, ma-am," he said quickly. "I'll have to think of somethin' else."

"It'd better be quick, Lafe," the woman said. "'Cause I hear tell of something. . ."

They both looked at her then. There was something about the way she said it . . .

"What you mean, Ma?" Ben asked.

"Seems like Wimple's son, Jerry, is askin' Linda Lou for her hand, now that Lafe is out of the runnin'."

"Who the . . . I mean who says I'm out of the runnin'?" Lafe demanded.

"I thought you . . .?" Ma began, a sly look in her fat-embedded eyes.

"Well, you thought wrong, Ma," Lafe continued. "I ain't steppin' out for nobody. Not as long as I can walk, talk and use these." He held out his large hands, knuckles up.

"No, Lafe," the woman cautioned. "That won't do. An' if you try that stunt, Linda Lou will never marry you. Nor can I blame her. Jerry's a nice boy but not for her."

"Now that's what you heard, is that it?" Lafe asked.

She shook her head, yes.

"Excuse me, folks," Lafe said, rising. "I got to see a party about a weddin'."

LINDA LOU WATKINS kept her face turned from the man seated by her side. She wished he hadn't sat so close. The very nearness of Lafe Hamling made it more difficult to say and do what she had in mind to. Lafe was talking:

"Now look, honey. I admit it was anybody because of what happened all wrong. An' I'm not askin' forgiveness. But don't go out an' marry just anybody because of what happened. . . ."

"I'm not marrying *anybody,* Lafe Hamling," she said bitingly. "I'm going to marry Jerry Wimple. He loves me and . . ."

"Now don't tell me you love him," Lafe said with fine irony in his voice.

It struck a wrong chord with her, even though it was the truth.

"Whether I do or not has nothing to do with the matter," she said. "I'm going to marry him."

"Because I gambled? Because I don't like to be run over and fight?" he asked with heat. "You knew that. And you said sometimes it was understandable. Oh, I'm not saying I did a very wrong thing in gambling away Wimple's money; it didn't belong to me, and anyhow I'm not offering an alibi for it. But don't give me a cock and bull story about how goody-goody you are. I'm going to pay him back. Every cent of it. You know that without my telling you. So what's the excitment?"

"Just this!" she almost yelled in his face. "I'm a little tired of your doing the wrong things and coming to me for forgiveness. There's a limit to it. And you've reached it."

"And so've you," he retorted. "Jerry Wimple! If that's your limit, you'd better start over."

Her face, from which the color had almost fled, became pale as snow. Her breast heaved in violent anger and her breath whistled through her pinched nostrils. For a bare instant her fists clenched and Lafe thought she was going to strike him, and braced himself for the blow. But it never came. Instead, her head sank and uncontrollable sobs shook her. He started to reach for her and, as though she divined his intentions, slid away from him to the end of the couch.

"Please!" she begged. "Please go away. I'm so miserable!"

He streamed from the house, almost bowling her father over as he stepped into the room, and left him with his mouth hung down to his second chin.

Lafe moved swiftly and blindly with long steps, neither seeing nor hearing any other person he met on the walk. So it was he didn't really see the short fat man with the wide panama covering his head, as they passed. It was an odd something, like instinct, which made him turn as they passed. It was then he recognised the man.

It was the fat man of the train, Mister Jones!

BEN HOGSON'S face changed from the look of indifference it usually wore, at sight of Lafe. Mrs. Murgatroyd was somewhere in the rear of the huge frame house, and the two men were alone.

"Ben! I just saw that fat guy I was telling you about; the guy on the train, who took me for a chump!" Lafe said sharply. "Wonder what he's doing in town?"

"Did you say soemthing about the doin's in Little Fork?" Ben asked.

"I don't remember, but it's possible. You know how things pop out when a game's on. . . ."

"So you must have told him some of the games what go on here when the boys get together," Ben said.

"Could be."

"I hope so," Ben said, and a tight smile twisted his lips.

"How you mean?"

"Well, I still got that deck. Matter of fact I been practising with it," Ben said. "Here, push that table over and I'll show you. . . ."

"Well," Lafe said after ten minutes of two-handed poker, "you haven't missed once."

"Lafe. How much money can you get up?" Ben asked.

Lafe was curious.

"Why?"

"Seems to me," Ben said, "that where's the spark, should be the fire. This Jones bird ain't alone. His friends must be here, too. Seems to me, you mentioned he wasn't dealing that last hand you played. So I got to figure the rest of them were in on the deal too.

"Now they come here either from

what you said or because they think there's more to be made here than in the place they *were* headin' for. Now what makes them think so?"

Lafe shrugged his wide shoulders. He couldn't figure the reason.

Ben went on:

"Knowin' you, I can't see you braggin' up the money that's here, because you're the last one to talk of money. So then they had other sources of information. Which brings up a question. . . ."

"Another?" Lafe asked. "Something's always bringing up questions to you. Well, go on."

"Yep," Ben said, smiling widely and showing his tobacco-stained teeth. "This one's an interestin' one. How come they picked you to play with? If they was sharpers, why pick on a lone cowboy? There ain't nothin' about you makes people think you're filthy with dough. Ever think of that?"

" 'Fraid my mind wasn't on that," Lafe confessed.

"But mine was," Ben said. "Right from the start. My opinion is, that there's someone right here in this town what asked these men to come down for the Rodeo, and for one reason, to take the towns-people of their money."

Lafe was outraged. "Now who would that be?" he asked.

Ben leaned back in the ribbed-rocker and rocked back and forth for a few seconds, his eyes half-closed and his fingers still fondling the deck of cards. He stopped rocking and looked steadily at Lafe for another few seconds before he said:

"What did Wimple say to you about the money you lost?"

Lafe smiled grimly.

"You ought to know that old moneybag," Lafe said grimly. "He don't think no more of a dollar than you do of your right eye. He lit into me plenty. But he knows I got stock and that six-hundred acres. So he gave me a week's time to rustle up the two thousand. 'Course I don't have it in cash, but I can sell the stock and get it. Only I was saving it for the time Linda Lou and I got hitched."

"Uh, huh," Ben was non-comittal. "Well, we'll know more about that when the time comes. Tonight the first of the boys'll get to town. Guys like Horst from the Bar-V, and Morris from Duke Ranch. An' they're always hungry for a good poker game. By tomorrow, the rest of the old gang will be in. We'll know more of it then.

"Right now. here's somethin' I want to show you. . . ."

LAFE HAMLING passed the El Gaucho Cafe and noticed the Trailways busses and Greyhound busses which were at the rear, and knew that the Rodeo was officially opened. Tourists. The Greek chef came out of the rear door and waved a greeting to Lafe. The lank Hamling smiled and continued on. Wimple was waiting.

The Bascom House was full of cattlemen. Most of them were known to Lafe and many greeted him as he walked up the worn steps. He waved or said a few words to each and walked into the cool interior. Lem Hawkins, the clerk, waved his hand to Lafe and called him over:

"Jerry Wimple's in the dining room. Wants to see you," Lem said.

"Jerry? I had the idea it was the old man who wanted to talk to me," Lafe said.

Lem looked blank.

"Don't know about that," he said. "Only know Jerry asked me to tell you to come in when I saw you."

Lafe nodded his thanks and turning, walked into the small cafe. He spotted

Jerry, a wide-set, heavy-bodied man, with a dark, sulky face, whose lips had an odd pouting look. He had small mean eyes, and they regarded Lafe unblinkingly, from across the room where he was seated in a narrow booth.

Jerry put his booted legs up on the seat effectively barring Lafe from sitting beside him.

"I been wanting to tell you something, Hamling," he said.

"Okay. I'm here. Let's have it," Lafe said.

"Stay away from Linda Lou," Jerry said.

Anger boiled over in Lafe.

"Who the hell do you think you are, telling me what to do?" he said, spacing his words carefully.

"I'm the man she's going to marry," Jerry said. "An' if that ain't reason enough, I just don't like for a gambler and crook . . ."

Lafe moved swiftly. His right hand grasped the booted foot and yanked. Jerry didn't have a chance. He came out of the booth, riding on one hip, and was dumped unceremoniously on the floor. A wild light blazed in his eyes. Lafe stepped away, hands on hips, and waited for the other to get to his feet.

"I been waiting for this," Lafe said. "Get up, and take it!"

There was a snarl on the other's mouth as he got to his feet. And mixed with the look of anger was a vicious promise of something evil. Jerry Wimple was well-known for his fighting tricks, which included boot-stomping and gouging.

The bullet-head went between the wide, low neck and shoulders until it seemed to rise from them. He hunched low and came forward on wide-spread legs. And Lafe stood his ground, a smile of battle in his eyes, and waited for the first blow. Neither had eyes for the suddenly-filled cafe. For Lem had surmised rightly what was to take place and had swiftly told whoever came in ear-shot about it.

They were only three feet apart before Jerry launched his attack. His head went even lower and suddenly those thick legs, strong as a horses' moved swiftly, churningly toward Lafe. Lafe waited, and as the other came in, chopped with his right hand down at the side of Jerry's face. The other didn't bother ducking. He took the blow and bored in.

But Lafe wasn't where he should have been.

INSTEAD, Lafe had side-stepped in a lithe motion and as the other charged past, swung with a writhing move of his shoulders. The blow was heard all the way across the cafe as it landed with a sodden impact on the side of Jerry's face. Wimple was knocked side-ways and carromed off the edge of the booth. And Lafe, quick to take advantage of the blow, followed, chopping with rights and lefts at the other. And with each blow a welt was raised on the sulky features of the other. But Jerry wasn't through, even when one of the hammer-blows half-knocked him from his feet. For Lafe in his eagerness to inflict as much punishment as possible had stepped in too close. Too close to dodge the kick which Jerry swung up at him. It caught him a little high. But it was enough to make him bend in sudden pain and shock.

And Jerry moved in then.

He didn't hit like Lafe. His blows were round-house affairs, But they carried all the weight and power of the thick shoulders and legs. And when they landed, Lafe was half-lifted from the floor. The last blow knocked Lafe to the floor. And this time Jerry moved

swiftly. Before the others could divine his intention, he had leaped in the air and came down on the fallen Lafe. But even though Hamling was prostrate, he still possessed a small shred of will and sense; enough to somehow will his muscles into action. So it was that the high heels didn't reach their goal, his groin, but instead landed in the belly.

A groan of pain was forced from Lafe's lips, as he tried desperately to roll away. But not for a moment was he able to avoid the pounding feet. Jerry didn't waste time in other leaps. He kicked viciously, small-arced kicks which stung and burned and had they landed where they were aimed would have torn Lafe's face to ribbons.

Somehow, and those watching wondered how he managed, Lafe avoided the swinging legs.

Jerry Wimple breathed heavily through wide nostrils as he moved toward the rolling man. His small mean eyes were glinting in wild satisfaction. He had been waiting a long time for this moment. And now he had Lafe Hamling where he had always wanted him, on the floor. His foot went back once more and inward, as he thought Lafe had stopped the rolling motion. And Jerry grunted happily, as the foot sank halfway into the other's belly. But the grunt turned into a snarl as Lafe folded his arms around the leg and twisted.

Jerry hopped on one foot trying to maintain a balance. And suddenly Lafe pushed hard. And Jerry went backward stumblingly.

Before he could recover his balance, Lafe was erect.

And this time there was no smile on Lafe's lips, nor were his eyes glinting in amusement. They were blank with an inward blankness, as though his anger was so great it could only blaze in his soul.

Jerry's eyes wore a puzzled frown, and as he moved forward again, those watching noticed that he was more careful. Only this time it was Lafe who charged.

And no longer did Lafe chop. His left hand jabbed at the bullet head, and as it went back with each jab, Lafe would cross the right hand over, and as it landed, the fist turned a little, tearing out flesh. In a few seconds, Jerry's face was a bloodied mess. And still the left jabbed with remorseless precision; and always the right came across to tear.

Suddenly Lafe shifted his attack. The blows came higher until first the left, then the right eye were closed, and Jerry was a stumbling beaten, pawing animal, whose lips made mewing sounds of pain and frustration.

The end came quickly. A right which stopped Jerry in his tracks, then a terrific left which lifted him in the air and spread him flat on his back, completely unconscious.

Breathing deeply, Lafe turned and started from the room. Only to be stopped at the door by Linda Lou, who had seen the whole fight. His eyes went wide as he looked at her. But as she looked from him to the man on the floor, anger stirred in him.

"There!" he said bitterly. "Take him, and keep him!"

Her answer raised a red mark on the side of his face. Her fingers stung from the slap she had delivered but her eyes held no mercy for him.

"I hate you!" she whispered in words so low only he heard them. "I hate you!" she repeated, and moved around him toward the fallen man.

Nor did Lafe turn as he walked swiftly from the room.

"HOW much did you get?" Ben Hogson asked.

Lafe pulled the thick pile of greenbacks from his trouser pocket and tossed them onto the table before the other.

"There's nine thousand there," he said. "The proceeds on the mortgage of my stock and ranch, plus what I could borrow. Think it'll be enough?"

"Yeah. Sure. They won't be foolin' till the big money's shown. By the way, seen any of the others?"

Lafe turned and walked to the window. He spoke with his back to the other:

"Nope. Haven't seen anyone."

Ben knew what he meant. The happening at the Bascomb House the night before had spread like wildfire through the town and there wasn't a man, woman or child who hadn't heard of it. And most of the sympathy was on Lafe's side. But he was blind, deaf and dumb when it came to talking about it. He knew nothing. Ben let it be that way. He pulled out the railroad watch and looked at it.

"Guess we'd better be gettin' out of here," he said. "Time's about ripe."

The little roof off the parlor of the Bascom House was full of men. They were gathered around a large, round table at which six men were sitting, playing poker. Lafe edged his way through the crowd until he stood by an empty chair. All eyes swiveled in his direction. For directly across from where he was standing, Jerry Wimple sat.

"Use another hand?" Lafe asked.

Jerry started to say something, but Morris, a lean, elderly man, wearing the long, handle-bar moustaches some of the old-timers still liked to wear, said, "Sure, Lafe. Sit in."

Lafe looked around to see who was in the game. There was Morris and Horst, another old-time cattle raiser, Jerry Wimple, the fat man of the train, Jones, and Green, the silent man, and a man, called Hoagy, who was an Easterner, but who liked to play with them, and came down every year just to get into their games. Jones and Green were the only strangers.

They were playing five-card stud, table stakes.

Lafe sat between Jones and Horst. Horst was dealing. Morris won the hand with two pair, and chortled as he raked in the pot:

"Come on, dogies! There ain't no blood yet. Let's get spurrin' a bit."

Hoagy grinned, threw up his cards, a pair of aces, and said:

"Can't ride with these."

"Well, load that gun," Horst said, as he tossed the cards to Jerry. "Can't make money sitting on bullets . . ."

They knew Hoagy's tendency to sit out high cards and get the suckers in.

Jerry riffled the cards expertly and dealt the first two. Lafe got a king on board and a deuce in the hole. He was high with his king. He didn't seem to do more than glance at the other's cards as he threw in a fifty-dollar bill.

Excitement rode Morris' voice as he followed suit when Horst dropped, "Now we're talking. I make it a hundred."

He had a nine on board.

Hoagy and Green dropped also. But Jerry and Jones stayed. And Lafe made it two hundred. This time there was a call all around.

Lafe's next card was a deuce. But Morris was high with a pair of nines. He threw in a hundred dollars. And when it came around to Lafe, he folded his cards. That left Jerry, Jones and Morris. Lafe had dropped only to see how the cards were going to be played.

Jerry had a six and queen showing; Jones an eight and ace. The next card to Morris was an eight; to Jerry a six; and to Jones a deuce. Morris was still

high. He bet two hundred and Jerry kicked it a like amount. Jones followed and Morris upped it another two hundred and once more Jerry kicked, and this time Jones stayed out.

"I'm going to see what the next card gives," Morris said, as he called the last raise.

He peeked at the last card and silently shoved five hundred toward the center of the table. Jerry also looked at his hole card and called the bet. He won with a pair of queens. Morris hadn't bettered his nines.

"Now we're playing," Morris said, grinning widely.

And it did seem as though Lafe's entrance into the game livened it considerably. There were several other hot hands after that of which Lafe won one, a thousand dollar pot. It was Jones' turn to deal.

Green, who had been in on several of the hands, and who had lost considerable money, suddenly barked:

"How about a fresh deck? This one's colder than day-old turkey."

Morris said:

"Guess you got a right, there, friend. They sure ain't been treatin' you right. Hey, Lem . . ." to the desk clerk who was also one of the spectators, "Bring . . ."

But Jerry broke in:

"I got a deck, here, Morris," and reached into a breast pocket and pulled out a deck on which the seal still lay around one corner. He tossed the deck to Jones. And as Jones broke the seal and started to shuffle them Lafe saw that they were the one of the decks similar to those they'd used on the train.

HE LOOKED away from the game and let his eyes wander about the room. Directly across from him, and standing behind Jerry's chair was Ben Hogson. Ben winked at Lafe and Lafe smiled in return. Then Jones started to deal and Lafe knew this was the hand. For his first two cards were a pair of aces, wired.

Lafe checked his aces.

Horst, showing a four, bet a hundred. By the time it got around to Lafe it took six hundred dollars to get in. Lafe made it an even thousand. Oddly enough, it was Green, the man who wanted the new deck, who was the first to fold. The third card was dealt after there were two other raises, and the pot showed twenty-six hundred dollars. The watching crowd aready was tense, as if they felt that this was to be the hand of the evening.

Lafe drew the third ace.

He looked around the table and sized up the hands. There were only two others, Jerry and Jones who showed anything. Jerry showed a king, queen of hearts; and Jones had a pair of jacks. Lafe bet a thousand dollars, and the crowd grew silent.

For the next five minutes, Jerry and Jones whip-sawed Lafe between them. By the time the fourth card was dealt, Lafe was down to four thousand dollars. The last open card was a trey for Lafe; a ten of hearts for Jerry and a third jack for Jones.

The two left Lafe with two of the four thousand. And Jones started to deal the last card.

And as he dealt, Ben Hogson called the cards:

"A trey for Lafe; an ace of hearts for Jerry; and a six for the fat guy. Which gives Lafe aces full; Jerry a royal flush and the fat guy jacks full. Now make your bets, gents!"

Not a single one of those playing looked at their cards. Then Lafe peeked at his, and smiling, threw his two thousand dollars on the table.

Neither Jerry or the fat one moved to either look at their last hole card or toward the money in front of them. But Lafe saw a film of sweat form on the fat one's forehead, and roll down the sides of his face.

"Well?" Lafe asked. "Something wrong? I'm betting my full. What about the royal flush? Or is it just a flush?"

Jerry Wimple bit suddenly dry lips. He didn't have to look at the cards. He knew Jones had dealt him a royal flush. His father had told him not to worry. He had brought Jones and his friends down to Little Fork just for the purpose of taking the ranchers. Jerry looked up from his cards, and over Lafe's head. And Lafe's hands became claws on the table's edge. Yet he knew he didn't have a chance, for the one pattern he hadn't thought of, fell into place. There had been two others in the game on the train. And he hadn't seen them when he walked in. He knew where they were now. Behind him!

Then Lafe looked at Ben and what he saw in Ben's hands, brought a smile of relief to his lips. Ben was holding a pair of old-fashioned .44's in his hands. And they were aimed straight at the two men behind Lafe.

"Just get your hands up, gents," Ben said. "And keep 'em there."

"Well, Mister royal flush," Lafe asked again, "what are you doing?"

Jerry shook his head savagely, looked at the suddenly savage eyes which seemed to hem him in, and started to get away from the table. But hands clawed him back into the chair . . . and Horst reached over and flipped the hole cards face up. They were an ace and ten of hearts. Ben had called the hand on the nose. Nor was he wrong about Jones' cards.

The crowd would have lynched the four and Jerry with them, if it hadn't been for Lafe. But before they let him go, Lafe and the others forced a full confession from Jones. Wimple had hired him and his friends in Chicago, had pointed Lafe out to them. The rest had been simple. But he had had a better idea; why stop with Lafe when there was so much more to be taken from Horst Morris and the rest? Wimple's name was mud.

THE outside door to Mrs. Murgatroyd's slammed shut and footsteps came running down the length of the hall.

Lafe Hamling turned at the sound and was just in time to catch the flying figure of Linda Lou in his arms.

"Lafe! Lafe, honey! Oh. I've been so wrong. Please forgive me."

He tried not to touch her, but his hands strayed to her hair and caressed the golden stream.

"I heard all about it," she cried bitterly. "You were right about Jerry. How could I have been so blind?"

But Mrs. Murgatroyd had the answer, as she closed the door softly on them:

"Guess love and a horse both have to have the blinkers taken off before they can run right."

A FASHION OF THE WILD WEST

IT WAS unfashionable, in the days of the old Wild West, for a man to carry his handkerchief in a hip pocket. It was also dangerous. A quick move toward the hip pocket might mean that a man was about to draw his gun. In those days when a man drew his gun he intended to kill, and do it quickly. It was one of the unwritten laws of that lawless land that if a man made a motion to draw his gun, he was at the mercy of his opponent, should the latter "get the drop" on him. Any move toward the hip pocket was apt to result in bloodshed. Therefore, it was the fashion to carry handkerchiefs anywhere else.

—Carter T. Wainwright.

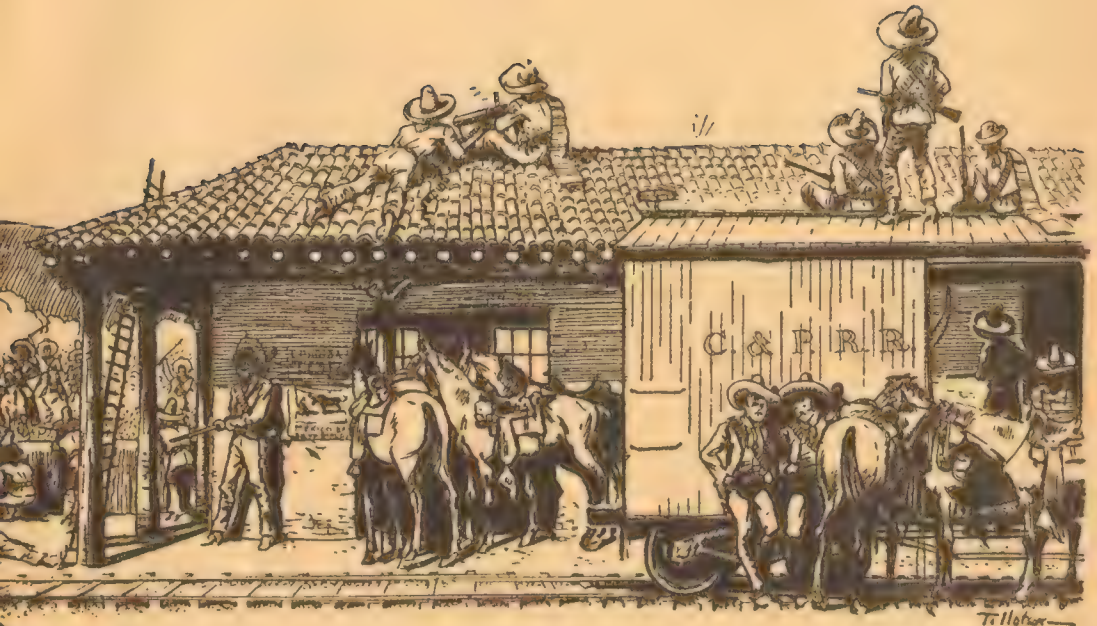
The *Rurales*, dreaded Mexican troopers, thundered to their deaths, when Lash's Maxim machine-guns began to sing. .

HE GOT off the train in Puerta Prieta, tired after the long ride west from El Paso, and crossed the dusty street separating railroad station from the line of adobe buildings with their welcoming shade. The street ran north and south and, at the end of it, was the Customs and Immigration House. Beyond lay Puerta Prieta, Sonora, now garrisoned by General Gonzales and three hundred men of Villa's Constitutionalist Army.

A man glanced briefly at him, turned for a sharper look, nudged his companion and inclined his head. They disappeared into Canby's big adobe saloon on the corner and Ed Lash thought bitterly, *well, maybe I'll get the answer a lot sooner than I thought.*

They were Whitley and Steward, men who had ridden with him on Colonel Holden's Gila Company holdings. They had been friends of the Stinson brothers, too, one of whom was now dead.

Lash moved on across the street. He hoped that, after several months, the shooting of the younger Stinson had



SOUTH TO CHIHUAHUA

by William Hopson

blown over, submerged in the welter of events across the border. For this was Revolution.

President Madero had been taken from his palace in Mexico City and murdered, along with his Vice President, Pino Suarez.

Iron-handed General Victoriano Huerta was in the Palacio Nacional as Dictator, backed solidly by the other Generals who had assisted in the murderously successful plot against "The Little Fellow."

But up north in Hermosillo, Venustiana Carranza—petulant, jealous, suspicious—had refused to recognize the new "President."

He had revolted, joined forces with Francisco Villa, bought arms from gun runners north of the line, and sent Villa smashing into Chihuahua City to become Military Governor of the state at the head of an army of nine thousand men.

Revolucion. It had begun as a murmur, grown to a cry of angry protest, and rolled forward in the savage roar of full scale warfare in the desert.

Villa had taken garrison after garrison from Huerta's armies in Northern Mexico and there had been some fighting at Puerta Prieta. But the small force of ill-armed *Federales,* their garrison visible down beyond the boundary fence, had preferred to withdraw into the desert after a desultory two hour battle with the three hundred Villa men under command of General Gonzales.

Lash nodded to two American Negro soldiers, patrolling in pairs with Springfield rifles over their shoulders. Beyond the line men of Carranza's forces, carrying captured Mauser rifles, also were on guard. Lash pushed onto the the side walk through a welter of men; quiet salesmen from the munitions companies, representatives of mining interests trying to get word across, rich refugees, plotting and counter plotting *politicos* who had been forced to flee. And, here and there, swaggering, gun packing, long haired men who referred to themselves as "warriors" going down to help Villa.

He wanted a beer in Canby's to cut the fatigue of the train ride but thought better of it. Whitley and Steward were there. It might mean another shoot out. Likely they were hunting Colonel Holden.

Ed Lash moved on up the street with his bag. It would be best first to talk with Abernathy and find out from his lawyer how things lay. The affair was months past. Things possibly had blown over, cooled by time. Colonel Holden might have relented.

The small frame building housing James Abernathy's office was empty, a padlock on the door. Desk, chairs, and the glassed in book cases housing rows of yellow backed law books were gone. A man's voice said, "Friend, if you're looking for Jim Abernathy, he's a few doors further up in that new building."

Lash said, "Thanks," and shifted the bag again with a brief nod.

He came to the building. It was low, square, flat topped. Plaster, painted a new cream yellow, covered the adobie's thick walls. It looked cool, crisp—and prosperous. Lash read, *James Abernathy, Attorney-At-Law,* in gold letters on the left front window. On the pane of the right one, beyond the open doorway, was lettered in more gold words, *The Gila Cattle Company. Colonel Joseph Holden, Mgr. Puerta Prieta, Arizona.*

Ed Lash let a brief, saturnine grin flit across his ugly, almost swarthy face and went inside the hallway. Through the open door of Abernathy's office he saw his lawyer, busy with some papers, back of the yellow desk.

He said casually, "Hello, Jim," and placed the bag on the floor.

"Good God!" Abernathy said and got up.

HE WAS tall, well muscled, in his early thirties, and prematurely balding. But the thinning dark hair, combed sleekly back from a solid, bony face only seemed to accentuate the gentle slope of his powerful shoulders. He wore cowman's high heeled boots into whose tops had been stuffed the legs of his trousers.

"You'll never know how glad I am to see a man, Ed," he said, shaking briefly. "So you finally got one of my messages and came back?"

Lash sat down. He said, "I didn't get any messages."

"No? I sent enough telegrams along the line of Villa's march. I was pretty certain you were with him somewhere. So you came back on your own. How come?"

"I came back," Lash replied, "because of a fuss with one of Villa's

minor Generals whose name, appropriately enough, is General Minor. Pancho could have straightened it out with a single order because I used to know him so well during his outlaw days in El Paso. But it was more than General Minor. It's hell down there in the desert, Jim. I preferred to risk a return here and see if this Stinson affair had blown over."

Abernathy sat d o w n again. He reached into a shirt pocket and then extended the cigarette pack across the desk's varnished expanse. His solid, clean shaven face was thoughtful. "Just get in?" he asked.

"On the train from El Paso. In a day coach full of fatheads, boasting and blowing about going down and winning the war for Villa. I hope they do. They'll get a bellyful quick enough. I know. It's no picnic down there, Jim. Those boys are playing for keeps."

Abernathy's eyes were on the other's worn, ragged blue suit and scuffed boots.

"Pretty tough going, eh?"

"Enough that I preferred to come back here in the face of this Stinson trouble. Incidently, do you know where his older brother Buck is—the one who was going to gun me down but didn't quite have the nerve?"

A faint trace of wariness came into the lawyer's eyes. This was getting on dangerous ground. But everybody in Puerta Prieta knew where the elder brother had gone; south into Mexico with the avowed intention of finding the fugitive and shooting him down. Abernathy said it.

"Everybody in town knows where he went. I tried to talk him out of it."

Lash grinned with saturnine humor. He used a thumb nail to push back the brim of his hat and lit the cigarette. He exhaled through his nostrils over cupped hands and spun the smoking match toward a distant gobboon.

"So you know, all right? What you don't know is that he turned *colorado* and went over to Colonel Argumendo's Red Flaggers. He's Major Fuentes now. Fuentes the Butcher, Villa's men call him. Working under a man who'll slit a captured Villa soldier's feet with a knife and then chase him on a horse until he drops and finish him off with a pistol shot through the head. I said they're playing for keeps down there."

He dismissed the matter of Buck Stinson and let his sardonic gaze rove around the office, still new enough that the odor of white paint as yet remained. "You're coming up in the world," he observed cryptically.

The lawyer waved a deprecating hand. "Lot better than the old place where I started ten years ago. More room."

"Own it?" Lash was grinning at him again, remembering who occupied the other office across the hallway.

Abernathy got up again, walked slowly across the concerte floor, turned and came back again. He placed both arms, stiff jointed, on the desk. His keen, penetrating eyes looked down into the desert burned face of his visitor.

"I own a one half interest in the Gila company's brand now, Ed. Colonel Holden is my pardner," he said quietly, evenly. "That's why I sent word for you to come back."

Lash flicked ashes from the cigarette. He began to laugh softly. He leaned back and laughed the harder. *"Sangre de Cristo,"* he finally said.

Abernathy was obviously irritated. He straightened, his eyes changing. "I can't see what's funny about it," he grunted.

"Of course not," murmured Ed Lash. "You're not in my boots. It's funny because my lawyer is a pardner of the

man who doesn't forgive or forget. I shot Stinson, a possible prospect as the Colonel's son-in-law, and he swore he'd hang me for it—even if it was over Gloria. But you being a pardner now puts a different face in things. The old devil will have to back down. He'll have to swallow his pride and put me back on the payroll as a rider. At least, I so presume, since you say you sent for me."

"YOU'RE going back on the payroll, but not as a rider. You're going to get more money—even more than you got as a starving Villa cavalryman living on tortillas and beans."

"Machine gunner," Lash corrected. "Against the *colorados*. And interpreter for Captain Treston, the Canadian, in charge of Villa's *ammetralledoras*."

The lawyer shrugged. He took another turn down the room and came slowly back, his brow frowning as though weighing some heavy court problem. Lash said, "I don't like men who beat around the bush, Jim. Let's have it."

Abernathy nodded and abruptly sat down once more. He half leaned across the desk, bent forward in the chair.

"All right, Ed. I'll let you have it straight. It's a big job. One for you and me."

"So?" murmured Lash softly.

"There's been hell to pay up here in Puerta Prieta since I advised you to skip out rather than face a jury. I still think I was right on that point. You might have beaten the case, even against the powerful influence Colonel Holden has in this section of the border country; but it would have cost a lot of money you didn't have—"

"Lawyers must eat," Lash agreed solemnly.

"Damn that!" snapped Abernathy. "It would have meant money, a possible appeal to the higher courts in case of conviction, and there was always the gamble that you might have been sent up."

"So you advised me to skip out until the Colonel's temper cooled. Stinson was out of the way. Skipping eliminated me. That left you with the field wide open with Gloria, who'd been chasing after me because I hated her and what she stood for. When is the wedding to come off?"

James Abernathy lost control of himself. He slammed the top of the desk with a big fist, his dark eyes blazing. "Damn you, Lash!" he half hissed. "You always were a brutal devil. And now you've come back from months with Villa filled with poison."

"She killed Stinson, not I. But—continue, Counsellor."

The new Gila company pardner got control of himself. He swalled hard, leaned back in his chair, and went on in a calmer voice.

"All right. About the time you slid across the line and went south every American cattleman down there was coming back fast. They and all other Americans with mining and other interests. It was get out or perhaps get shot. Villa has been pretty cagey after Major Fierro killed Benton, the Britisher. Washington threw in a stern warning of possible intervention in case Americans start losing their lives."

"He's keeping his word," Lash said.

Abernathy nodded again. "Down there, yes. But not up here around Puerta Prieta. You see, Ed, you know we've got four thousand head of cattle down on our Sonora holdings, less than one hundred miles below this border. We can't get one damned hoof or horn back here under pain of death for any man found going after them. That's the why of all those messages you didn't get."

He paused. His right hand was partly extended across the desk now, the cigarette between two fingers wisping grey smoke. Ed Lash waited, the saturnine grin on his hard, ugly face. Abernathy went on.

"There's only one way on God's green earth to get them back. We tried the only other possible way. Fifteen heavily armed punchers, led by Whitley and Steward, slipping across past General Gonzales' patrols to the nearest waterholes, rounding up everything in sight, and making a dash for the line. Five got back."

"And the other ten who didn't killed off a few of Gonzales' soldiers?"

Another nod. "They were attacked. They had to protect themselves—"

"They were better mounted. They could have run for it," Lash cut in harshly. "They didn't have to fight. I know Whit and Steward too well. You and the Colonel are damned fools!"

"NEVER mind never mind," Abernathy said impatiently. "Maybe we made a mistake. A few men on both sides got killed. The important thing is that General Gonzales telegraphed a report of the incident to Francisco Villa and that damned bandit went wild. He ordered Gonzales to kill on sight every man riding a Gila horse or who even looked like a Gila rider. This line is ringed with bandit soldiers just aching for a chance to shoot any American foolish enough to cross over. But what's really bad is that Gonzales is feeding three hundred soldiers and all the poor in Puerta Prieta on the cream of the beef from our holdings! Every day they drive up twenty or thirty head to the slaughterhouse he's rigged up over by the bull ring. Those cattle are worth thirty-five to forty dollars a head. A hundred and fifty thousand dollars on the hoof that we can't touch."

He paused again. It might have been the heat, though it was late afternoon, which caused him to mop his brow with a handkerchief. Lash sat and watched; he wasn't grinning now. His unhandsome face, so d a r k he looked almost like a Mexican, was blank; a little cold. He felt disgust well up from within.

"That was one way," he said. "You tried it and found out that they might be 'bandits' but they're not cowardly 'greasers.' I said they play for keeps, and d a m n what Washington said. What's the other way?"

"You," the lawyer said without hesitation. "You were a friend of Villa in El Paso for years. You've been fighting with him as a machine gunner during his recent campaigns all over Northern Mexico. If you'll go with me to Chihuahua City and get an order from Villa to General Gonzales, allowing us safe conduct with our cattle across the line, there's one dollar a head bonus for you on every critter that crosses back into Arizona."

CHAPTER II

"YOUR generosity," Ed Lash said bitingly, "is tearing to shreds *mi probe corazon.*"

It was his turn to get up. He rose, an ugly, almost brutal sneer beginning to spread across his desert burned face. In their greed—and it was nothing but greed,—Abernathy and Colonel Holden had done a thing which could have led to serious consequences. Washington's warning to Villa, Carranza's petulant attitude toward both American and Mexican leaders, the violent anti-American riots of not too long back—all of them had set nerves ajangle. Not a day was passing that rumors of American intervention spread up and down the

wires from Juarez to Mexico City. Nor had the order of President Taft, sending twenty thousand American troops to stations along the border, in the early Madero days, been forgotten by the Mexicans.

That raid of Gila men accross the border, under arms, and the fight with Gonzales' soldiers easily could have been the fuse needed to set off the powder keg.

Lash looked out the window, scowling, his back to Abernathy. He weighed the problem, revolving the thought in his mind as a child rolls a lemon drop. He didn't give a damn about the Colonel and Abernathy. The latter had been revealed in a new light. The man was avaracious, hungry for wealth and power, ambitious. Small wonder he had paid court to Gloria Holden.

"Well, Ed?" came his voice from behind, impatience, and perhaps uncertainty, in the tone.

Lash didn't answer. He continued to scowl out the window. He might be able to explain the situation to Villa; that it would be far better to let the matter drop in the interest of good relations with the men in Washington. For Villa, though uneducated he might be, was shrewd. He no longer was so much a name as an institution. He had, so Lash had heard, even hired himself a publicity man to present his side of the story to the American public.

On the other hand, he was hot tempered with a fierce loyalty to his soldiers. And he knew of President Wilson's policy of "watchful waiting." He just might, unpredictable as he was, laugh out loud and retort that Washington had too much at stake to intervene and the order would stand. Gonzales' men would shoot any American crossing the line who looked like a Gila puncher.

Lash's thoughts switched to Holden, who had driven him from Puerta Prieta. If the Colonel was in town, he'd soon be striding up the walk at a fast pace, sided by the two men who had led the abortive raid into Sonora. Lash looked past the slant of the pane, as far as he could see down the street.

A dozen Negro troopers clattered by in the wake of a West Point looking Captain, dusky faces rocking up and down in the Army saddles. Lash turned.

"So," he murmered again. "The shoe is on the other foot between the old devil and me now, eh? He wanted to hang me but now he loves me."

"Will you accept?"

"If I do, it won't be because of you two precious cut-throats. Yes, that's the word, Jim. You used to be my friend. But you've grown greedy and ambitious. Enough that you'd risk full scale intervention by the United States. You're two of a kind and I hate both of your guts."

"Will you go?" Abernathy repeated patiently.

"How do you know I won't double cross you when we get down there? One word to Villa that you're Gila and he'd have you against an abode wall in thirty minutes. I'd bet on it."

"I'll risk it, if you give your word."

"Why not me alone? Why should you risk it?"

Abernathy let go a half sigh. He suddenly looked tired. "I've got to, Ed. It's about Gloria."

Lash let out a half snarl. "The hell with her. She makes three of a kind."

Jim Abernathy shook his head. He seemed to be past anger for the moment. "I know," he nodded. "She caused the shooting between you and Stinson, and you don't have to say the rest of it. It's in your face, more than hatred. I said before that you can be a brutal devil. And you hated her from the beginning because she was the daughter of a rich cattleman, flirting with her father's

riders and enjoying the jealousy she aroused. Well, that's all past. That killing made another woman of her. I tried to tell her that Stinson was vain over his handsomeness and a mean man because he knew Buck would back him up. He'd been in trouble before. But it was gaul to his soul to see you sneer in her face with that ugly manner you have, and Gloria come right back for more. He lost his head and you shot him in a gun fight. It wasn't your fault. It wasn't her fault. Stinson alone was to blame."

"Yeah, Stinson alone," sneered Lash.

"At any rate, a month after you slid across the line she pulled up and went to Mexico. Colonel Holden accused her of being in love with you and figures that's why she left."

"So he's blaming me for that too, eh?"

Abernathy shrugged. "What difference does it make? What counts is that weeks ago she wrote that she was heading for Chihuahua City—and since that time she's been swallowed up somewhere in the Revolution."

"That," grunted Lash, "is the only good news I've had since I got back."

Abernathy's voice became a trifle cold now as he said, "No matter how mean and soured you are, Ed, you don't mean that."

Lash flung the cigarette butt to the floor and looked into the lawyer's half hostile eyes. "Every damned word of it! Because of her I had to pump two bullets into a vain, fatheaded idiot who thought she wanted me and got jealous. I mean every word of it."

BOOTSTEPS sounded on the walk beyond the doorway as three men strode past the window. Abernathy and Lash moved simultaneously. The lawyer rose, said, still coldly, "Then don't ever say it again, because I'm going to marry her."

Ed Lash didn't answer. He had backed across the room as Colonel Holden, followed by Whitney and Steward, came in. The last named two were packing guns; a lot of men were packing guns along the border lately. Lash's worn coat tail was back, his hand lying close to the big pistol at his hip.

"I see," he said sourly, "that your two military geniuses went running."

"Hold it, Lash," rapped out Holden crisply in the tone of a man used to being obeyed. "There'll be no trouble."

"There'll be plenty of it if they don't get their hands off those guns and clear out."

Colonel Holden—the title came from the war in Cuba—took a step forward. His mustache had begun to quiver from inner anger. Although only in his mid-fifties, the mustache and his hair was a platinum white. He was of medium height, blocky of body, hard, authoratative, and he had proven that he could be ruthless toward any man who aroused his animosity. He wore a light summer suit and carried a riding crop in one hand.

"They're my men, Lash, and they'll obey my orders," he snapped. "Understand?"

Whitney, the taller of the two, had moved to one side. He stood with a hand on gun butt, his eyes alternately flicking from Lash's face to Colonel Holden. He had begun to wear his hair long, "warrior" style.

"They're friends of Stinson and they'll obey my order to get their hands off those guns or throw them," came the hard reply.

Steward said coolly, "Say the word, Colonel. We don't like greaser-lovers."

"I'll say it, Steward," shot Lash. "There are two of you. *Now throw those guns or get out!*"

Holden let out a roar and wheeled on his men, his arms outflung in front of them, pushing them back toward the door. "Get out, get out!" he yelled at them. "Go on down the street and wait for me at Canby's. There'll be no gunfight."

He turned, breathing heavily. His hand shook as he reached into a breast pocket of his coat and brought out a handkerchief. He looked at the stony-faced man standing in the corner. As an Army Colonel, he had been a stern disciplinarian. The rule had been carried through his career as a rancher. The quivering in his hand came from a pent up anger at the blank faced man now leaning indolently in the corner.

This was a new experience for Colonel Holden, and he didn't like it.

Years of iron self control brought his voice back to normal. "Lash, you're in no position for another shoot out. Oh, I know you're mean and tough. I'm a little that way myself. But you're in a spot and I want to talk to you."

"If I wasn't in a spot, you wouldn't want to talk to me. And your partner—" the words dripping sarcasm—"has already talked."

"So you know what we're up against? Cattle across the line worth thirty-five to forty dollars a head and that we can't get back because of those American murdering bandits. Yes, plain bandis, I said! Killing ten of my men protecting our own property!"

Ed Lash found time to smile. He was beginning to enjoy himself. "Well," he said, deliberately drawling, "if I remember correctly Whit and Steward are like a lot of other Americans up and down the border. They look upon a 'greaser' with contempt and figure a man isn't a real man unless he's shot down two or three of them. They figured that one good Americano could whip a dozen Mexicans anytime, eh? So instead of running for it they decided to fight and got their shirt tails popped by a bunch of men who've got more real guts per man than a dozen Whits and Stewards. And now you're whining about it."

ABERNATHY had stood back of his desk during it all. Now he looked at Colonel Holden and gave a half shrug. "I've already told him the setup, Colonel. But he's bitter and soured because of your actions after the Stinson affair. And he's turned on me because I'm your pardner."

"I seé," replied Holden. And to Lash: "You are refusing?"

"If I thought," Ed Lash said, "that I could convince Villa, I'd try it because it might save some lives up here. But I know Pancho too well. I think he'll refuse. And since you two know how I feel toward you the answer is that the both of you—all three, if you want to include the woman who was the cause of it—can go to hell!"

Holden's face changed color and his shoulders rocked away from the wall. His chest rose as he reached for the riding crop. But Jim Abernathy stopped the storm outburst with a lift of his hand.

"Hold it, Colonel. That's final, Lash?"

Lash nodded curtly and he didn't bother to reply.

"In that case," the lawyer said, "I'll have no other alternative than to play my last card, one I hoped wouldn't be necessary. The streets of this town are swarming with sheriffs, deputies, Arizona Rangers, a U. S. Marshal and some other Government men. You can't get out, Ed. You can't duck across the border now like you did before. The moment you set foot on Mexican soil one of General Gonzales' men would blow off your head with a Mauser rifle.

So the choice is yours. You and I go to Chihuahua City to see Villa or you go on trial on a murder charge that I'll see will hang you."

Lash let the coat fall forward again and reached for cigarettes. He leaned in the corner, the saturnine grin returning to his ugly face. He looked at the two of them and began to laugh softly—self-absorbed.

"If I stay, I'd probably hang, because you two would see to it. If I go, I face a summary execution on sight at the hands of one General Minor. And of course I might run into Buck Stinson, though it's not likely. Your pet killer, Colonel—the one I suspect you encouraged to follow me down to Mexico—isn't with Villa. He's masquerading as a Mexican Red Flagger, a *colorado* officer. He goes by the name of Fuentes now. Fuentes the Butcher."

"Never mind Stinson," snapped out Colonel Holden. "Will you go or won't you go?"

Lash smoked ruminatively and flicked the ashes from the cigarette, looking down at the floor.

"Come to think of it," he said, "there's a lovely Mexican girl down there working as a nurse in Villa's hospital train. Took care of me when I got burned by a Mauser slug. I guess I'll go back and see her."

Holden brightened. He actually smiled. "Fine, Lash, fine! And if you swing this deal it means two dollars a head—"

Lash burst out laughing and Holden, puzzled, looked at the scowl on Abernathy's face. "I promised him one," the other pardner muttered.

"One? Jim, how could you? Lash deserves more. Two dollars it is, with all expenses paid. Want to shake on it, Lash?"

"No," sneered Ed Lash, "my hands are dirty enough from the train ride."

CHAPTER III

THE telephone in their El Paso hotel room jangled sharply, the ring cutting into Lash's heavy sleep. He had been dreaming of Maria Elena Chacon, the lovely girl who had taken care of him for a week on the hospital train and whose two aristocratic brothers had, like so many of the *hacendados,* thrown in their lot with Carranza and given their lives to the Revolution.

Lash rolled over and fumbled for the chain switch on the table lamp. He pulled it and picked up the receiver.

"Four o'clock, sir," the clerk's voice said.

"All right," Lash said.

IN THE next bed Abernathy yawned and stretched his big smoothly muscled body. He yawned again and threw aside the covers, swinging his feet to the floor. Lash lay and looked at him, revelling in the luxury of the bed. Good beds hadn't been plentiful during the past months, and there wouldn't be many more where they were going.

"I could sleep a few more hours," grunted the lawyer, working hands through his thinning hair.

"So could I. We'll need it going down on the train. It'll take about forty-eight hours on what normally is an eight or nine hour run. The tracks have been blown up, repaired, blown up again, and then repaired again."

He shifted the covers aside, sitting upright on the edge of the mattress. Lash's feelings had in nowise been altered or softened by the ride east from Puerta Prieta. By unspoken consent they were enemies and would remain so until the end, by the same token their open animosity would be put aside under the exigencies of the job ahead.

Abernathy rubbed the back of his neck and looked over at the other man.

He saw a body that was hard with the leanness that comes from irregular meals and long weeks of exposure to the elements. He pictured those long, muscular arms picking up an entire Maxim with its tripod and belts and sprinting forward through the sand. Lash wore no undershirt and Abernathy saw the long, white scar running slantwise for nine inches across the back of his left shoulder.

"Nice little souvenir," he commented.

"What?" Lash asked.

"That scar. How'd you get it?"

"Oh, that. One of Huerta's *Rurales* did that with a Mauser, coming in at a dead run and shooting from the saddle while I was unstopping a jam. Lucky shot."

He reached for a bath towel hanging on the foot of the bed, changed his mind and got a cigarette instead. "Well?" corrected the lawyer. He was curious about this hard-bitten man who, within a matter of hours, once they stepped on Mexican soil, would have Abernathy's life in his hands; curious to see if there was any of the "warrior" vanity. Most of them loved to talk to their exploits, usually a little loud.

"I got it unstopped," Ed Lash replied and picked up the towel. He went into the shower and Abernathy waited, smiling thinly. He was thinking of Lash and Gloria's disappearance in Chihuahua City before Villa took it. Through this man who was getting them out of a bad spot not only in the matter of the cattle but also with the rebels at Puerta Prieta he hoped to find her. Lash had influence with Villa. If Villa sent out word, and she was in the state, she would be found.

Once she was found and that precious paper with Francisco Villa's crudely scrawled signature on it in his possession, Abernathy intended to look up a certain General—what was the name? Oh, yes. Minor. General Minor.

He mustn't forget the name.

Presently Ed Lash came back from the bathroom, freshly shaved. "Better hurry it up. Train leaves in four hours. And you won't get a chance to shave on it unless you go up and get some hot water out of the boiler."

"*Rurales,* you said," Abernathy prompted. "What about them?"

"Huh? Oh, them. They're tough boys. Best fighters Diaz and Huerta ever had. They're loyal to the Government, no matter who heads it, because they're police. They don't desert and not many of them surrender. Hurry it up. There'll be a wild jam for tickets at the station. This may be the last train out."

Abernathy picked up his own towel, got his shaving kit, and went in. He leaned back out of the stall, his face covered with lather. Since that unforgettable few minutes in his office two days previously neither he nor Lash used the other's first name.

They were bitter enemies. That was understood.

"Why?" Abernathy asked.

"Because Villa has about cleaned up things in Chihuahua and established order. He's too cagey not to keep going, now that he's got the Federals on the run and his armies rested. When he moves he'll stop every train and cut all telegraph communications to prevent any possible leaks to General Velasco's headquarters in Torreon. We're going on that train if we have to ride the cow catcher."

They finished dressing and packed, travelling light, and went downstairs. They spent the previous day in El Paso where Lash knew all the Immigration officers. He also knew the city editor of one of the daily papers.

THEIR credentials as representatives of the press had cost the Gila man

four hundred dollars in cash—with the admonition that there would be no copy filed. The editor hadn't cared to have battle news coming in from two reporters of whom the boss had never heard.

At six o'clock they entered the Juarez station and bedlam. It was alive with a clamoring mass before the ticket windows. Now that Villa had reached Chihuahua City many who had fled were anxious to return. The one train a day could carry only a trickle. Abernathy looked at Lash, a little helplessly, wondering what their next move should be. Lash handed over his bag.

"Go get aboard," he ordered tersely. "Find a seat and hang on until I get the tickets."

The lawyer boarded the train, its dirty engine complacently giving off smoke up ahead. He found a hard, unpadded seat in an ancient day coach and snapped off all protests of others to sit with him. Five minutes before the locomotive whistled off he saw Lash's big shoulders come twisting down the already packed aisle. He sat down, stepping over the other's legs to take the inside seat by the window.

"I got them," he finally said.

"Good. Nothing to prevent us getting to Villa now except a war."

As for Ed Lash, he made no answer. He sat looking out at the flat expanse of desolate, arid desert sliding past. The brief, relaxed attitude of the hotel room was gone. It was as though the switch from American over to Mexican soil had brought about an equal transmutation of mind and body.

He felt it and he thought, *I'm beginning to think I'm more Mexican than American.*

What lay ahead he didn't wish to contemplate. Somewhere down there were too many faces out of the past. Villa and General Angeles, Carranza's Secretary of War. General Minor, pudgy, champagne-drinking officer who so bitterly hated all Americans and Ed Lash in particular. Little Captain Diaz, the artillery officer in charge of the *Ninos,* who carried his young Indian "wife" back of the ammunition crates where his gun was mounted on a flat car. Buck Stinson, American gunman turned renegade Red Flagger under a Mexican name and under the cruellest man in Mexico, Colonel Argumendo, the *colorado.* Maria Elena, her white skinned, aristocratic face bent over his pain filled one on the pillow; she whose parents had been murdered by Orozco, her brothers gone on the field. She had lost all.

They floated past, one after the other, like a strange procession of ghotly faces in the night, the night his mind itself looking back, always back into the past. They were followed by the face of still another; a slim, lovely, laughing girl, passionate and high spirited. Because of her, he had shot a man to death. Because of her, he was going south, a prisoner of his own word, where life was cheap and the dry sands of Chihuahua were turning red, sucking up greedily the life blood of the thousands who had died.

No, he thought, Abernathy had been right; Lash had only been bitterly angry. He didn't hate her that much. She'd been only partly to blame. He could have closed in on Stinson, perhaps, and blocked the draw of his gun while he knocked him down. He hadn't because he had known that he later would have had to face two brothers instead of one. He had let him jerk his gun and then shot him twice through the chest.

Strange, the difference in men dying close and men dying at a distance. You sat crouched back of the tripod and squeezed them off in short bursts to conserve ammunition and not overheat

the gun, feeling its song of vibration and watching for them to bunch. Hit the damned murdering *colorados* in the belly, Villa had yelled. You hit them in the belly and they tumbled forward, jackknifing, and they were puppets, figures on a dry, glaring white screen. Far away, not like Stinson. He had been close, and the pistol in Lash's palm hadn't vibrated. It bucked hard against his hand, lashing out short lances of fire, and he had seen the jerk of Stinson's body and, afterward, the lax flabbiness of his lips as he lay in the dirt before the bunkhouse door while a woman stood screaming.

A WOMAN? the voice asked Ed Lash. No, it chided him, you don't hate her that much. It's too small a thing to remember when the sunsets are blood red and the bones of the thousands are bleaching over all the lands of Northern Mexico.

He stirred restlessly in the seat and Abernathy said casually, "You mentioned this General Minor. Some trouble with him. Anything personal or just general?"

"Personal," Lash said, and leaned back in the seat, his hat over his face.

Fifty-six hours later they were in Chihuahua City.

The overcrowded train crept into the yards at a snail's pace while the passengers, limp from the suffocating heat and sleepless nights, began to peer through the windows. Lash twisted his cramped, tired body and felt it come alive. His eyes were on the yards.

They were a mass of trains, surrounded by a mass of humanity who lived on them. Abernathy leaned over Lash's shoulder from the aisle seat and peered, his face with the two day growth of whiskers expressing wonder. He said, "My God, look! Hundreds upon hundreds of women and children festooned on top of those box cars and flat cars like teeming black ants. And women soldiers, too."

"A few," Lash said, still looking out the window. "The majority are *soldaderas*."

" *'Soldaderas,'* " The lawyer repeated. "It's funny, I've been on this border for ten years and I still can't speak this lingo. You speak it like a native. But some of them fight?"

"Occasionally. The majority follow after their men, cook for them, care for their wants, and bear their babies."

The train was creeping on down the track toward the station. Abernathy's eyes were still upon the trains. "Cooking right on top of those cars. I knew this revolution business could get rugged in spots, but I never dreamed Villa was working on such a mass scale. How the devil do these women handle those cooking pots on top of a car without burning up the whole train?"

"They cook on sand," Lash answered briefly.

They hadn't talked much coming down. There hadn't seemed to be much to say. Lash had done the foraging for them on the train, mostly a little food he could purchase from Mexican women who had brought supplies.

Abernathy had said once, munching distastefully over a cold *tortilla* wrapped around fried beans, "I know you hate my insides, Ed. You even think it was ambition only that caused me to get a half-yes from Gloria in the matter of marriage. It wasn't. I am ambitious —I'm going to be Governor of this brand new state of Arizona some day. But marrying the daughter of my pardner is something besides ambition. I've been in love with her a long time now. I was before you came over from Texas and went to work for the Colonel. So I hope you'll understand that the thing I forced you to do is as much for her sake

as the cattle. I know you're hard and bitter, but I can't think you'd let that stop you from helping to find her. I shudder to think what might have happened. Those fellows you call *colorados* or Red Flaggers—"

"Federal irregulars, who loot, burn, destroy, and kill all without mercy," Lash had interrupted.

"That bad? And she was here when they held the city. I'm almost afraid to get there."

They were there now, the aisle packed coach rolling slowly past the station where hundreds of *soldados* milled around in worn *Huaracha* sandals, baggy pants and shirts, every description of hat, and with blankets over their shoulders. All wore cartridge belts and carried rifles. The rifles were Springfields bought from gun runners in the north and Mausers captured from the Federals.

Ed Lash took another look at the massed trains again—ten of them—and felt a little more satisfied. At least Villa was still in Chihuahua City. The main army had not pulled out. Lash would see him as soon as possible, try to get the written order to General Gonzales at Puerta Prieta allowing the cattle to be driven north in the Arizona line, and then. . . .

He was a bit amazed at the sudden realization that he hadn't looked beyond that. He had agreed to try and get the order; none of them had mentioned his part beyond that.

Lash put the thought from his mind.

THE train came to a jerky stop. The exhausted standees in the aisles, who had slept sitting on seat arms, began to writhe into concerted movement toward the two ends of the coach. The last of the crying babies were carried out and Lash and Abernathy followed, bags in hand. The ground felt good under Lash's booted feet after fifty-six hours. He flexed his arms and grunted in sheer relief, and looked at the all too familiar scene.

Around them were nearly a thousand people, a shuffling mass of tired, relieved passengers pushing their way through a shuffling mass of lounging soldiers and their women. Lash and Abernathy had gotten off up above the station. They shouldered their way through, past half naked crying and playing children, stepped around fires where *soldadera* mothers were busy over *tortillas* and meat and beans from the commissary cars. Spread out on the plain, beyond the ten smoking engines in the yard, were hundreds of groups of men mounted and on foot, grazing horses foraging for what little the arid land provided, smoke fires of a mighty desert army encamped.

They finally reached a street where soldiers, weighted with the ever present rifles and *cartoucheras*—cartridge belts, —strolled idly, smoking crude corn husk cigarettes. And suddenly Ed Lash felt at home again. The thought came again. He was almost more Mexican in some ways than American.

Two soldiers came by, a little drunk, and stopped to peer sardonically at the two new *Americanos*. During those first days of bringing order out of chaos left by the Red Flaggers in Chihuahua City, Francisco Villa had ordered the prompt execution of any soldier found drinking.

"One moment, amigos," Lash said in Spanish. "Where is the car—the little red caboose—of General Francisco Villa?"

They looked at him and grinned in sheer insolence. *Americanos* were *Americanos,* those arrogant, white skinned Gringos from the north who thought they were so much superior to the Mexicans. So they were going to intervene and send their *Yanqui soldados* into

Mexico, eh? Well, let them come! They would drive the damned Gringos back across the line and whip the *Federales* at the same time. Pancho Villa could do it. Pancho Villa was the greatest General in the whole world.

One began the mocking song:

"Oh, the Gringos are all fools,
They've never been in Sonora;
And when they want to say, 'Die Reales,'
They call it 'Dolla an' a quarta' . . ."

"Oiga!" exclaimed the other. "This Gringo talks better Spanish than you, you pelon!" the contemptible name for all Federal soldiers, whether regulars or Red Flaggers, because so many of them, their heads freshly shaved, had been conscripted by Huerta from Government prisons. "Pancho Villa? You are an American photographer, perhaps? Where is your camera? Go get it and take my picture! I am the greatest fighter in the Constitutionalist Army. With my own pistol I killed four Rurales and ten pelones. . . . "

Lash finally got the information. The red caboose, which was *El General's* headquarters, was up the track, as close as possible to the luxurious house Villa had set up for his legitimate wife.

"What were they saying?" Abernathy asked as the two moved on along the street siding the railroad yards.

"The caboose is up ahead a ways," Lash replied. "Pancho is over in the yards somewhere. They're bringing in a few carloads of mules and horses and he's helping unload."

CHAPTER IV

SOMETHING like a half sneer crossed Abernathy's unshaved face. He was in ill humor from the long, suffocating, dirty ride. He wasn't used to going without a bath and shave. He was tired, he wanted to get the order to General Gonzales and get out, but the man who could write it—the famed desert fighter, Pancho Villa, Chief of all Carranza's Generals—the damned bandit was over in the yards helping to unload some *mules!*

The sneer deepened on the lawyer's tired face.

He spoke what was on his mind, his voice snappishly grating. "I'll admit, Ed,"—he was beginning to call Lash by his first name again—"that I was pretty impressed, almost stunned, when I first saw these trains. I always pictured Villa as a two-bit bandit riding into a small village with three or four hundred soldiers and looting it. I never dreamed he was working on such a massive scale. I was, for a moment, almost convinced. So now the great Chief of Staff, Military Governor of the whole state of Chihuahua, turns out to help some of his soldiers unload a bunch of stock."

Lash looked at him and grinned. Now that the trip was over and he was back in Mexico, a great weight seemingly had been lifted from his shoulders. He felt good again.

"You don't know Pancho," he said. "Sure, you and a lot of your kind think of him in terms of being a bandit. Maybe some things in his record are nothing to brag about. But he's got nine thousand soldiers here and I'll bet you a hundred dollars he knows half of them by sight. They idolize him. And one reason they do is because he might be *El General* and Military Governor of the state of Chihuahua and all that, but he'll still go down and help his peon soldiers unload a few cars of stock."

"Where do you suppose they got them?"

Lash said probably from one of the fabulous Terrazzas family's holdings. Villa already had taken over their flour

mill and slaughterhouse to grind their corn and slaughter their beeves, of which they had tens of thousands, to feed the poor and his armies. He had signed a decree, as Military Governor, that the peons would have sixty-two acres each of their millions. He had taken $500,000 of their bank's gold reserve to stabilize his own new currency. He had collected another $500,000 for the safe return of Don Luis, Jr., Director of the bank. Their shops were filled with his workmen, turning out crude but effective shells for his beloved *Niños*—his grey cannon now mounted on flat cars out in the yards with their vicious, canvas covered snouts pointing into the sky.

South. Toward Torreon and Federal General Velasco's crack armies.

Yes, the new horses and mules probably had been Terrazzas. It had been said that Terrazzas horses mounted most of the armies in Northern Mexico.

They were striding past the passenger train's lazily panting engine now. Lash left the street with a curt nod of direction and they crossed over into the yards. Abernathy shifted the bag to his other hand.

"Now that we're here, Ed," he said, "I'd like an honest opinion. Do you think you can swing it?"

"I'm promising nothing—I didn't in the beginning," Lash grinned at his anxious face. Impatience was written across it. "Villa's a good man in as many ways as he's supposed to be bad. I've seen him order a man shot to death against an adobe wall, and then turn around and pick up a crying kid and jog it on his knee while he sung it a doggerel song. He's quick tempered but he can be fair. Maybe he's got over your men killing several of his. Maybe he's still boiling mad. We'll have to take it slow and not rush things. Give me a few days to feel my way along. And," he finished with the kind of grin the lawyer recognized for what it was: sheer poison, "if I were you, I wouldn't spread the news around that you're Gila. Just wait—and hope that I don't do it for you."

Abernathy's face darkened in sudden, helpless anger. He had played his own cards in his own way, ruthlessly forcing Ed Lash to do his bidding in the face of a threat that could mean a hangman's scaffold. He was gambling his own life on the word of a man who hated him for what he was; taking that gamble because it involved almost one hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of beef, now not worth a dime as long as it was in Sonora. Such had his ambition, his desire for wealth and power, driven him.

And now the cards had been switched. Lash held the winning hand. Abernathy knew that his life hung by a thread—that thread being the word of the sardonical faced man walking beside him into the yards to find Villa. One word from Ed Lash to Francisco Villa that this "reporter" actually was half owner of the Gila Cattle Company and, therefore, responsible for the deaths of several of his men would send the Military Governor's quick temper to the boiling point.

Abernathy knew without doubt that he would be shot within thirty minutes.

HE KNEW that Lash knew it too and was savoring the thought, playing with it, rolling it around in his mind with great relish.

Lash was deliberately baiting him, holding it over his head in repayment for what Abernathy had forced him to do. It was in the sardonical grin on Ed Lash's ugly face, the free swing of the big shoulders which had shown

galvanized gun action faster than Rufe Stinson.

The Gila man scowled and shot a side glance at the sardonically twisted mouth, the two days' growth of black whiskers, the skin so burned by the past months with Villa's armies in the desert that it was swarthy. This was a new and different Lash from the big Texan who had come to the Gila holdings as just another rider and spurned the advances of the woman Jim Abernathy wanted so badly; advances he'd have given his soul to have aroused in her. And the lawyer in him thought, I've got to be careful. I've got to get him out of the way, but not until we get that order to General Gonzales from Villa.

His mind, its keen analytical processes shaken out of timing for a moment, put down the fear he felt and began to work smoothly again. He knew what he had to do. He knew when. And, if he could contrive to meet General Minor, he would know how.

He said, "Where are we going to stay?"

"There's a woman runs a hotel here," Lash said. "Her name is Estell Bleeker, though the Mexicans call her *La Gorda*, the Fat One. She's spent thirty years in Mexico and can scare hell out of any General, Federal or Villista, who crosses her path. A lot of them probably are staying at her place. If she's got a room, we'll get it. If she hasn't, Villa has a special car rigged up for American reporters and cameramen, with a Chinese cook for them. But we'll see Pancho first and get passes as reporters, though he's going to laugh his head off when I present my credentials."

They moved across the front end of the hospital train. Two of the cars bore the letters, AMERICAN RED CROSS. Back of them, in the other cars, sixty American and Mexican doctors with modern medical equipment took care of battle wounded and sent them to improvised hospitals in Chihuahua and Juarez.

Lash had lain in one of them for a week while the slash across his shoulder began to heal enough for him to walk again. He glanced that way now, and his brittle eyes momentarily softened.

He hoped that lovely little Maria Elena was still with the army as a nurse.

They moved on past the end of the hospital train, crossed the tracks in front of the engine, and finally came out on a siding into the midst of shouts, laughter, peon oaths, plunging horsemen, and a cloud of dust mushrooming up around a stock car. An incline of boards had been laid from the door of the car to the ground around which, in a big semi-circle, crowded twenty or thirty horsemen. A mule plunged down the incline and leaped away, and a half dozen cavalrymen, turned vaquero for a little while, spurred after it with ropes singing.

The gap left by the horsemen closed in solid again and another scramble began inside the car. Hoofs slashed hard against the sides and more peon oaths filled the air. The soldiers began to roar with laughter.

Abernathy said, "We should have known better than to take those drunken peons' word for it. I thought it funny that a man like him would stoop to such trifles."

"You don't know Pancho," Ed Lash said again.

A horseman loped down the track and swung toward the waiting semicircle of riders. He wore the uniform of a General. Lash caught sight of the pudgy figure with its huge curling

black mustachio and, as the man pulled up hard, the heavy dark bags beneath the glittering black eyes. They looked at each other, Lash with insolence and the other with a bursting, new born anger.

Then Lash spoke. *"Bueno tarde, General Minor,"* he said mockingly.

He followed it with the same kind of salute.

"So you came back?" General Minor said softly.

"Yes, mi General. I am a reporter now."

"We'll see about this," muttered the man on the horse darkly, and wheeled away. He jabbed in the spurs and loped on down the track.

"Did you say General Minor?" Abernathy asked.

Ed Lash nodded briefly. "That's the boy who's going to shoot me. He doesn't like Americans."

"You never said what lies between you."

"No," Lash agreed, "I never did."

A gap showed through the curved line of waiting horsemen and Lash said, "There's your man. There's the boy whose soldiers your men killed."

FRANCISCO VILLA stood at the foot of the incline. He wore a small light hat, a dirty white shirt whose collar had been ripped off, a faded brown suit shiny from use and discolored around the armpits from sweat-salt, and spurred boots. A frightened horse, still lashing out occasionally at the sides of the car, stood with trembling front legs braced, a rope around its neck.

On the other end of the rope, swearing peon oaths amid the laughter, was the Military Governor of Chihuahua.

"Oiga, mi General!" shouted a *soldado*. "Look out or he'll jump down on top of you."

Villa suddenly let go of the rope. He leaped up the incline, ducked into the car and more plunging horses, and drove the toe of his boot into the recalcitrant one's belly with a thud of leather against flesh. It shot down the incline and *El General* followed. Two men grabbed the flying rope, lost it, and a rider swooped in, bending low in the saddle. He rode out with the animal snubbed up tight.

The Constitutionalist Army had another badly needed mount.

Lash and Abernathy were fifty feet away when the head of all Carranza's armies spotted them. The black eyes in the round, swarthy face lit up. He strode over and stuck out his hand to Ed Lash.

"You owe me one hundred gold pesos on the bet, Eduardo," he said. "I said you'd be back inspite of General Minor."

Ed Lash grinned and reached into his pocket. He brought out the money in American gold twenties and paid them over. Villa pocketed the five Gila coins in the brown suit.

"I just saw the General," Lash said. "What's he doing now?"

"General Minor? Oh, since you left I promoted him. He's in charge of the mules."

"You owe me two hundred dollars back wages for that last fight," Lash grinned, sticking out his hand. "I went out so fast after General Minor swore he'd shoot me that I didn't have time to collect."

Francisco Villa chuckled delightedly and delved into his pocket. He brought out a sheaf of money with his own picture on it, peeling off one thousand pesos. "You damned Americans," he laughed. "This should square it. Good Villa currency. If it wasn't, your Gringo banks in El Paso wouldn't be buying it up at eighteen

cents on the dollar. *Oyez!* How is the old town?"

He turned abruptly and they were striding across the tracks, southward toward the siding where his famous little red caboose had been spotted by the engine. He spent most of his time away from the Palace with his soldiers, and sometimes he went home to the luxurious house he shared with his legitimate wife.

He had ignored Abernathy, striding along with them. Just another Gringo. They were always annoying the hell out of him.

"It's still there," Lash said. "So is your other wife."

Villa's little black eyes twinkled. He was famous for his love of a good joke. He chuckled again. "My real wife is here. Do you know, Eduardo, the politicos and ricos who wouldn't spit on me when I peddled milk in the streets here twenty-five or thirty years ago now come to tell me that I'm a big man now—Military Governor of Chihuahua, and mustn't have two wives. They say I can become President of Mexico."

"You can," Lash said. "You've come a long ways since the last time you borrowed ten dollars off me in El Paso."

Villa's swarthy face grew serious. His was, in many ways, the nature of a child, of lightning changes in mood. He could be furiously angry one moment and laughing the next.

THEY had reached the back of the red caboose. Francisco Villa said, swinging up the steps, "I'm a fighter, not a politico. I am a very ignorant man who can hardly write his name. Let an educated man be President. I say it a dozen times a day to those damned American reporters who keep asking me if I shall become President."

He had said it many times. He was saying it again. There had been rumors that Carranza the petulant, the suspicious, was growing jealous of the military successes and world wide fame of his chief General; fearing that when Villa, driving down from the north to meet and join forces with Emiliano Zapata coming up from Moreles in the south, whipped Huerta out of the capitol, *El Jefe*—the chief—would be thrust aside.

Lash, following Villa up the steps into the car, knew that any such fears were groundless. He put aside the thoughts, his mind returning to the problem at hand. Now that he was back in Mexico, the feeling that had been his in Abernathy's office was returning. Bitterness toward the lawyer, Colonel Holden, and the woman who had brought all this about.

But he had given his word and it would be kept. And why not ask Villa now? If he refused, Lash's part of the bargain would be kept.

They went inside.

A partition cut the caboose in half, the other end for Villa's Chinese cook, with chintz curtains at all windows. Pictures of nude ladies adorned the walls, along with one of Villa, of Venustiano Carranza, of Major Fierro, who had shot the Britisher Benton at, so the reports said, the direct order of Francisco Villa.

The room, tiny to extreme, was dirty grey with double wooden bunks, which folded up against the walls. In one always slept Villa and General Angeles, Secretary of War for Carranza. The other was occupied nights by Doctor Raschbaum, Villa's personal physician.

Only the three men were in the little room now.

"So you've come back to fight with us again?" Villa asked, flopping into a chair. "Well, I think I can promise

you much of it."

Lash reached for a cigarette, extended the pack, then withdrew it. He had forgotten. Francisco Villa didn't smoke.

Lash said, "No, Pancho. We're a couple more of those damned American reporters you mentioned."

El General slapped his thigh and roared. *"Oyez!* Ho, ho, ho! You, Eduardo, a reporter! The best machine gunner that Captain Treston ever had and now you say you are of a newspaper. Ho, ho, ho!"

Lash lit the cigarette and grinned. Abernathy, catching a word now and then, sat in silence; ill at ease. He stirred, cleared his throat, and looked at Lash.

"I can't get the drift of the conversation, Ed," he said. "How about me going on over to the hotel and trying to get a room?"

"All right," Lash nodded. "Tel La Gorda I'll be over in a little while." And to Villa: "He doesn't speak Spanish. He's going to La Gorda's hotel."

Abernathy rose, stuck out his hand to Villa, nodded politely. To Lash he said, "Get it as quickly as possible, Ed. I want to get out of here and get back. Those damned reb—those fellows up there are costing us a fortune in beef every day we delay. And be sure and ask him about Gloria, will you?"

"Qui dice?" asked Villa.

"He says," translated Lash, "that there's an American girl down here, lost in the revolution, that he hopes you'll try to help him find. She's going to marry him. He's really not a reporter. We had to have credentials to get across the border at Juarez. He's hunting his girl."

"Valgame Dios! May God have mercy on me! As if I don't have enough to do besides looking after every Gringo who blunders in the way down here. What is her name?"

This was it. This was what Lash had been dreading. Villa knew that the head of the Gila Cattle Company whose men had killed several of his was a Colonel Holden.

"Gloria Holden?" Ed Lash said, and waited.

Villa tugged at his mustache, finally shook his head. He hadn't associated the name of a lost American girl with that of the man in Puerta Prieta. "No, I don't know. There are a few with the American Red Cross, helping the soldiers. Some work as nurses. He could inquire."

Lash translated and Abernathy, nodding a goodbye to Villa, left the two men alone. He found his way down the streets, following the directions Lash gave him, and came at last to the hotel, a big, square adobe building of two stories.

As he reached the front door it opened. A man stepped out. Abernathy stared, unable to believe his eyes.

The man was Buck Stinson.

CHAPTER V

"MY GOD!" Jim Abernathy burst out. He stared again. "Buck! What are you doing in Chihuahua City?"

Stinson looked him over with a hard grin of recognition. There was no friendliness in it. He was remembering that Abernathy had been retained by Lash as his lawyer after the shooting of the younger Stinson.

The older stood six feet three inches, and his boot heels increased his great height to six feet four. He was broad of shoulder for a man of such statue, his coarse face topped by close cropped yellow hair. He wore trousers and

shirt and a black Stetson hat.

He grinned, ignoring the other's proffered hand. "Well, if it ain't the old law book man himself," he said harshly. "Came down to find Gloria, eh?"

"Forget it, Buck," rapped out Abernathy. "I want to talk to you. Quick! Have you got a room here?"

"What about?"

"Ed Lash is in town."

It was Buck Stinson's turn to stare. He jerked his head. "Come on. Let's go upstairs."

They went inside. To the left was an office and register. To the right, past the stairs leading to the rooms above, was a huge patio one hundred feet square surrounded by rooms on three sides. It was filled with tables. Several men in officers' uniforms were eating an early supper. At another table four Generals, half drunk, were playing cards and quarelling over the rules.

Abernathy followed the other man up. They came out on a long porch looking down into the patio and strode along its length to a corner room. Stinson unlocked and they went in. Abernathy sat down.

Stinson said, "So Lash is back? Where?"

"Over in Villa's caboose with that cheap bandit. Jabbering away like brothers. Buck, you've got to get out of here quick. He'll be here any minute."

Stinson grunted. He went to the bureau with its small round mirror, pulled out a top drawer, removed a pistol and put it inside his shirt. "This is what I've been waiting and hoping for," he said harshly. "The minute he steps through that door he gets six of them right through the belly. He put two through Rufe, I'll put six through him."

"You'll do no such thing."

Stinson looked down at him, his face a hard, vicious mask. He had killed a man or two before coming to Puerta Prieta with his brother to work for the Gila company, or so he had boasted. And the months with Colonel Argumendo as a renegade Red Flagger had allowed him full license for his instincts. Villa's men knew. He had been aptly named.

"No?" he said coldly. "Still protecting your client, eh?"

"I'm saving your life because I need your help, Buck," Abernathy said patiently. "He knows you're a Red Flagger masquerading as a Major Fuentes. Fuentes the Butcher, he said they call you. What do you suppose is going to happen when he finds you here? An adobe wall with your back to it and a firing squad. Villa would rip this town apart if he knew you were here."

"If I put six *balassos* through him when he steps in that doorway—"

"Forget it, Buck," and Abernathy rapidly sketched the chain of events that had brought them from Juarez to Chihuahua City on the train. Stinson leaned with his buttocks against the bureau, his hard eyes on the lawyer's face as he talked.

"So that's how it is, Buck," Jim Aberanthy finished. "You skip out of here to another hotel or someplace until Lash gets that order to General Gonzales at Puerta Prieta. The moment he's got it, I want you to put a knife into him. There's an extra thousand waiting for you when and if you get back to Puerta Prieta. I was going to try and contact General Minor, but this is a hundred times better. But of one thing we must be certain: Lash must not return to the states. I'll make it better than that, Buck. He's getting a dollar a head bonus for every head we can salvage out of that Sonora

cattle deal. There's no reason why you shouldn't have it instead."

Buck Stinson pulled at his chin thoughtfully. Abernathy waited. Outside in the late evening the quiet of the side street was broken by a group of horsemen clattering toward the railroad yards. Somewhere a dog barked. From the patio below came laughter, oaths from the still quarelling Generals, the sound of singing. La Gorda's heavy bellow at one of the scurrying Chinese servants penetrated the walls.

"You said something about General Minor?" Stinson finally asked. "You want to meet him?"

"Do you know him?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no."

"So you know him? Yes, I want to meet him. He hates the ground Lash walks on. I saw fire in his eyes when he rode up by the mule cars this afternoon. He's sworn to shoot Lash. I was planning on using him toward that end until I ran into you. Can you arrange it? You might slip up. And it'll never do for Lash to return to Arizona."

"Gloria, eh?" jeered Stinson, and then laughed harshly at the anger in the other's eyes. "Oh, you don't have to tell me, Jim. She always was sweet on him. No wonder you don't—by the way, did you know she's here in town? In this hotel?"

Abernathy's leap carried him off the bed to his feet. "Here? Gloria's here? Are you sure?"

"Well," drawled Stinson, grinning, "I ought to be. I'm awful sweet on a little señorita who's her best friend. Little gal named Maria Elena Chacon. That's one of the reasons I'm staying over for a few days longer. I'm going to take her back with me to Palacio Gomez, where we're stationed."

"Where is she now? Gloria, I mean?"

Stinson jerked his head. "Over at the trains. Sometimes they eat over there and sometimes here. Every Mex from the mule tenders to the Generals are after them like hawks—except when La Gorda ain't around. There's a gal for you. Wow!" He threw back his head and laughed coarsely.

ABERNATHY said, with a sigh of relief, "I'll telegraph the Colonel that she's here and will come home with me in a few days. But—Buck, you'd better get out of here. Lash said it might be days before he asked Villa for the order releasing our cattle."

"All right," Buck Stinson replied. "I guess that means I cain't stick around the hotel no longer. But General Minor will want to know what happened to me."

"Minor?"

Stinson nodded. "He's got the next room to this one."

"What's he got to do with you?"

Stinson gave Jim Abernathy a long, penetrating look. He seemed to be weighing something in his mind; indecision came into his face. Finally: "Who's side are you on in this fuss, Jim?" he demanded suddenly.

Abernathy saw that he wasn't joking. He threw up both hands in a passionate gesture, laughter breaking from his lips. "Oh, dear God!" he half groaned. "I? I personally hope that they slaughter each other all over the place. I hope they blow each other to so many pieces that the buzzards won't even bother with what's left."

"All right." Stinson was packing his few belongings. "You're after Lash and so am I and so is General Minor. If you breathe what I tell you to a soul, Jim, I'll personally turn you sideways against a wall and shoot furrows in your back like I done to a lot of Villa's men we captured. There's a big force of ours in Palacio Gomez, down south

or here, under Colonel Argumendo. I'm in here to get the dope on Villa's trains and supplies and men. I'm working with General Minor."

"Ah!" breathed out Abernathy, comprehension changing his face. "So that's it? Minor has switched to the Federals."

Stinson threw the small sack on the bed, stuffing socks and dirty shirts inside and drawing the string tight. "Oh, they're doing it all the time," he said carelessly. "They fight on one side awhile, then they go over and fight on the other side, then they switch over and turn *colorado*—it's a hell of a war. But with the General it's different. He's sore at Villa for busting him down as a mule supervisor or something. So he turned on him."

"I see," nodded Abernathy. "Maybe he could help you in the Lash matter. Ed never said what was between them."

Stinson began to laugh. He picked up the bag with the few clothes. "Lash is the cause of it," he said. "Seems as though about sixty of 'em went out on mounted patrol, Lash going along as machine gunner. They ran into about thirty *Rurales*. Those *Rurales* are bad babies, Jim. But with sixty men and a good machine gunner along, Minor turned tail. They had a running fight for ten miles and Villa lost ten or twelve men. Lash came back and reported to Pancho. He was boiling mad. And when Villa heard about it, that bandit really went on the prod. He ordered General Minor thrown into prison to be shot the next morning for turning yellow. Then for some reason he changed his mind. I got a hunch it was Lash got him out of it. Anyhow, Villa put General Minor in charge of the mules and he wouldn't take it."

"I SEE," Abernathy nodded again. He was all of a sudden not tired. He felt wonderful. The fears preying upon his mind during the past four days fled. Gloria was here, safe and well. Lash was with Villa, perhaps getting the thing which had brought Abernathy south into Mexico. And when he returned north again there would be no spectre of a hard bitten man to haunt him. Buck Stinson or General Minor, or perhaps both, would take care of that.

"So that's the setup," Buck Stinson finished. "Me and the General are blowing out of here fast pretty soon now. He knows the password to get through Villa's patrols and I know the one to get us past the Federal outposts. It'll be a long hard ride, but we'll make it. And when little Pancho hits south for Torreon, we'll be waiting for him with both barrels. What I want you to do is get somebody who speaks English and tell the General the setup. He hates all Americans, but when he finds out you're a friend of mine and after Lash, that's all you'll need. Well, I got to be going. See you later, Jim."

He went out and Jim Abernathy unpacked. He undressed, laid out clean clothing on the bed, and shaved. He wanted a bath but satisfied himself by sponging down with water from the basin in a corner. He was finishing with his tie when a knock came at the door and a woman's voice called, "Jim."

He went to the door, and realized that his heart was pounding. He opened it and looked at Gloria Holden and the lovely Mexican girl with her. He had never allowed visible emotions to show themselves while with her. His had been the role of the calm, strong man, always waiting, always patient. He stuck out his hand and said, "I'm very glad to see you again, Gloria. Your father has been worried. Won't

you come in?"

She said, "I wanted to be alone for awhile. Jim, this is Maria Elena Chacon, one of Villa's nurses."

Abernathy had to admit that the girl was astonishingly beautiful. He saw in the clear eyes and lovely face suffering, sorrow that had gone deep, and he guessed that tragedy born of the revolution had brought its shadow over her life.

"How do you do, Maria Elena," he greeted; and to Gloria: "Does she speak English?"

Gloria laughed. "Of course, Jim! She was educated in Los Angeles. Maria, Jim Abernathy is my father's pardner in business up in Arizona."

"I'm happy to know Gloria's friend," Maria answered.

He asked them to sit down. He wanted to look at Gloria, at the golden hair, light like spun gold, at her eyes and slim figure. He had been right. She had changed. This new Gloria was a mature woman, serious, intelligent, fit wife only for a successful man. He thought of Lash. Ed Lash was coming along pretty soon; still hard, still brittle, still hating her. Or would he notice the difference? The thought made Abernathy uneasy.

He said, "How did you know I was up here? Oh, Buck, of course."

"We met him down the street," Gloria explained. "We were coming over from the train. One of Villa's patrols ran into a Federal Patrol forty miles south of here last and they had a small battle. They brought in the wounded early this afternoon. We've been pretty busy."

"So you're a nurse now?" he asked, half amusedly.

"I do what I can," she said simply.

"Going to stay?"

"Why . . . yes, I guess so, Jim. Maria lost her parents and two brothers in the revolution. When it's over she's coming home with me to Arizona, aren't you, dear?"

"I hope so," smiled the girl.

"Not if Buck Stinson has his way," Abernathy laughed. "He says he's going to take you with him when he leaves."

"I think he would, too," Gloria replied. "He's been hanging around the hotel for several days now. And I've been a little worried, frankly. There's something in his eyes when he looks at Maria that makes me want to take a gun and shoot him. She's afraid of him."

"Did Buck tell you that . . . Lash is here with me?" he asked.

She nodded, but the face of Maria lit up. Abernathy saw the look. Lash had mentioned something about a Mexican girl. Could it be possible. . . .

"She knows Lash well," Gloria explained. "She took care of him when he was shot."

Maria's black eyes sparkled. Abernathy saw in the look what he had suspected the moment Lash's name was mentioned.

The girl was in love with him.

CHAPTER VI

OVER in the caboose Ed Lash and Villa, between interruptions, were still talking. General Angeles hadn't returned. He was working on reports for Carranza over in the Governor's palace. Lash had gotten special passes signed for Jim Abernathy and himself while they chatted of the earlier warfare in the north. A group of soldiers lounged around the car, smoking and talking; anything to be near *El General.* That was the secret of Villa's success, Lash knew; magnetism. He drew men to him as flies are drawn to sugar.

And now they were striking a bargain.

Villa was still angry over the border incident at Puerta Prieta.

"So all this Colonel Holden wants is permission from me to take his cattle back into the United States, where they should have been all the time, eh?" he asked. "He did a very serious thing. I think it was deliberate."

"Why?" Lash asked.

Villa's eyes flashed angrily. "Because these damned American businessmen and the rico Mexicans want intervention," he snapped. "They know that when we drive out Huerta and those other murderers of Madero the new Republic will be for the poor. The lands will be divided. The oil companies and mining interests now sucking the life blood out of Mexico will have to go. They don't want that. They know it, and if they could only get the United States to intervene, what difference that a few thousand Mexican and American soldiers get killed fighting each other? The ricos will get richer and the oil companies will sell more oil—" He was beginning to get mad, his temper flaming. Lash recognized the signs.

He said, "I agree, Pancho. That's why this order to General Gonzales should be given. Let Colonel Holden have his cattle."

"Colonel? If he is a Colonel, why is he raising cattle instead of fighting? These things I do not understand."

"He was a Colonel in Cuba. He fought the Spaniards there."

Villa removed his hat and scratched his head. "Well," he said, "if he's killed off a few Spaniards, I guess he can't be too bad. So I'll strike a bargain with you, Eduardo. We are going to do some more fighting. That much I will tell you and nothing more."

Lash already knew. Villa told nobody, not even his staff Generals, what his next move would be. That was another reason for the success that was making him famous in Europe. He used his own methods of fighting and had perfected the deadly night attack. He never followed orthodox methods of warfare. When he moved he cut communications and then struck swiftly, lightning strokes that always took the Federals by surprise.

Surprise and night attack. Hit them from the side with somebody like crusty old General Urbina, divert them, then take them hard from the opposite direction at night with his *muchachos*.

"What's the bargain?" Lash asked.

"I'll sign what you ask or telegraph General Gonzales. And you come back with Captain Treston as a machine gunner. He needs you."

Lash weighed the thought. He had gone back north, sick of war, hoping only to get cleared and take up life again in or near Puerta Prieta. But Steward and Whitey were there and their being there would, only in a matter of time, bring on the inevitable. A shoot out.

"Well?" demanded Villa. "Is it a bargain?"

Ed Lash grinned and nodded. "All right, a bargain. But not as a gunner. I go in with the cavalry."

"Go in where?" demanded Villa, his black eyes darting.

Ed Lash leaned back and laughed. "Where else but Palacio Gomez, gateway to Torreon? That's where the tracks run. I've got a little matter to settle with an American one of these days anyhow and it might as well be there. Fellow named Buck Stinson. He's none other than Fuentes the Butcher. He's in Palacio Gomez with Argumendo's Red Flaggers."

Francisco Villa appeared stunned,

not that Fuentes was an American, which was already known, but of the information about Colonel Argumendo.

"Oyez!" he exclaimed. "How did you know that?"

"I have friends in El Paso. You telegraphed the information to Carranza in Juarez. He told his officers, and—"

Villa stomped to his feet, swearing. His peon curses filled the interior until the Chinese cook, getting *El General's* supper, put a frightened face through the doorway expecting to see an American murdered on the spot.

Villa stamped up and down the narrow confines of the car. "What a war!" he half yelled. "I send information to my chief and in five minutes every beggar in Juarez and every barber in El Paso is shouting it on the streets."

"It's not quite that bad," Ed Lash grinned.

"No? It's worse. Never mind. So you want to ride with us and find this American turned colorado butcher?"

Lash nodded. "I want an order for a horse."

"Carrai! He wants a horse. A thousand men in my army camped out there in the desert are without horses and you want a horse to go kill an American."

"He's a Red Flagger working with Argumendo," was the quiet reminder.

That brought *El General* up short. He boasted in those days that he had never wantonly murdered any man. But to two types of enemy he showed no mercy.

HE KILLED every captured Federal officer because, he said, they were educated and should know better.

And he executed ruthlessly every captured *colorado* or Red Flagger.

He sat down and actually grinned again. "All right. Write out the order to General Gonzales and I'll sign it. All you Gringos are crazy. One of these days I'm going to issue an order to discharge everyone of you and send you home. Captain Treston bawls around like a bull in a slaughterhouse pen because he can't find the two interpreters I hired for him after you left. The rest of grumble because they haven't been paid. I've got four Germans, two Italians who can't speak either English or Spanish, and one fellow from London who's supposed to speak English but who none of the English-speaking Mexicans can understand. They say he must be a spy and ought to be shot because they can't understand a word he says. The only reason, Eduardo, that I haven't kicked the whole bunch out and whipped the Federals with my peon soldiers is because of Captain Diaz, in charge of artillery. His five American gunners are the best in the world with my Niños."

Presently Lash left the car. The sun was almost down in the west, its yellow glow partly obscurred by the smoke of a thousand supper fires. He moved on up the track, as though loath to leave the yards until the last minute. Around him the *soldaderas* camped on the ground, on top of box cars, on flat cars, cooked supper for the men they followed. Lash heard laughter, the cries of children, soft liquid Spanish. "My man Juan is of the Brigada Zaragosa. . . ." "And then there were the Federales right in front of them on horses. . . ." "No, Lucia's little one did not live. It fell from the top of a car. . . ." "See! A little goat butter for the tortillas. . . ."

The smell of wood smoke, of dogs, of horses, of food from a hundred cooking fires, mingled here and there with the sounds of curses, masculine laughter, singing. Two men leaned against the side of a box car, close by where

their women squatted over the evening cooking fire. The men were singing the plaintive, yet derisive, *Los Hijos de la Noche*—the Sons of the Night.

"I am of the children of the night,
"Who wander aimlessly in the darkness.
The beautiful moon with its golden rays
Is the companion of my sorrow.

"I am going to lose myself from thee,
Exhausted with weeping;
I am going sailing, sailing,
By the shores of the sea.

"You will see at the time of our parting,
I will not allow you to love another.
For if so it should be, I would ruin your face.
And many blows we would give one another.

"So I am going to become an American,
Go with God, Antonia.
Say farewell to my friends.
O! may the Americans allow me to pass,
And open up a saloon
On the other side of the river!"

LASH smiled a grim twist of the lips and moved on down the length of the train. This was an army on the move, ready for the next order of General Francisco Villa, whose scrawled signature was on the order to General Gonzales, in Lash's pocket. These were fighting people, following blindly, believing.

They had suffered much. Under Diaz the Dictator now in exile in Paris, the Surveyor's Law—allowing the surveyor one third of all the land he surveyed into great plantations for the rich—had taken away their pitifully few acres of arid land and left them to starve, to wander aimlessly, to become slaves of the rich, to be rounded up by the *Rurales* and sold at twenty-five pesos a head and shipped down to the state of Morelos to die in the heat and under the lash.

Emiliano Zapata had stopped that with a roar of guns, the enslaved flocking to him to fight. He was driving northward, toward the capitol where a now uneasy Huerta sat on his throne. And in Chihuahua City another man, Francisco Villa, smashing down toward the south, had been resting his tired armies.

This was a people who had, with Madero the Little Fellow, sounding the call, risen up against their oppressors. Men going into battle when *El General* Pancho Villa gave the word.

Lash passed the train, leaving the singers behind. The next was an armored train. On the front car was mounted an *El Niño*—the boy child—one of the cannons which were the darlings of the Constitutional Army. The car was a flat, around whose sides and ends had been bolted a four foot line of steel plate to ward off ambushes from small arms fire. Sputtering Spanish came from above and a man by the breech waved his arms and sputtered more Spanish.

Lash grinned, dropped the bag, and climbed up. Captain Diaz, short, squat, mustachoid, wheeled and saw him. He let out a yell and embraced Lash in a bear hug.

"Eduardo! You Gringo dog. *Oiga!* Listen. They said you deserted. They said you were a Federal spy and was shot by General Minor. They said—*No le hace!* It makes no difference. You have come back to fight with us, yes?"

"Si, mi Capitan Diaz."

Diaz promptly hugged him again. "Ah, that is good! We will show these

Federales, eh? You will ride with me on the train?"

Lash nodded. Diaz was impulsive and affectionate, but he knew his Niños. "But I'll go to La Gorda's hotel tonight," Lash said.

"That pig pen? It is filled with Generals. You can not get a room. You will stay here with me on the car. I command it."

He insisted that Lash come over and look at El Niño. It was the beauty, the sweetheart, the loved one. It would blow those *colorados* out of every town in Mexico. It was the best gun in the world. He brought out a welcome bottle of *mezcal* and insisted that they drink.

They drank. It was fiery but Lash was feeling the effect of the long train ride. He drank again, for he was tired.

It took him thirty minutes to get away from Captain Diaz, who by now was weeping. He patted the gun's open breech, swore more lurid oaths against his American gunners who wouldn't give it proper care, wept some more, drank from the now almost empty bottle, and waved goodbye in the dusk.

The fires were pinpointingly aglow for miles out on the desert when Ed Lash finally made his way down the quiet sidestreet and came to the front door of La Gorda's hotel.

CHAPTER VII

IT was the supper hour at the hotel, the patio's tables now filled. Among them scurried the hurrying Chinese servants, under the bellows of *La Gorda* herself. She was in her sixties and huge, with a big bunch of room keys at the belt of her black dress. She had spent half her life in Mexico.

Gloria Holden, Maria Chacon, and Abernathy were at a table over in the corner. They were waiting for *tostados,* roast meat spiced with chili, coffee and pie. The place babelled, the four Generals still absorbed in their game of cards and still quarrelling. They were pretty drunk now.

Gloria's eyes kept watching the door past the foot of the stairs. Abernathy had said that Lash would be along anytime. A few officers were drinking at the small bar over on the west side of the room, served by a Chinese *cantinero*—bartender.

Abernathy watched the American girl, her eyes always, always flicking toward the front door. He was a cool man in many ways, but his jealousy of Lash was the one chink in his armour.

He said, a little gruffily, "Don't get impatient, Gloria. He'll show up—after he's made the rounds and met all his Mexican friends again."

She looked at him and did not reply for a moment. For she too could look back. The sub-conscious mind, she once had read, gives play to fears and desires during sleep. And the nights had been long when she lay tossing and crying and filled with terror as a man stood before her in front of the bunkhouse door, a smoking six shooter in his right hand, his face blank, emotionless.

"Well," he had sneered at her, sheathing the big pistol at his thigh, "there's your lover. Now you can switch to his brother."

The Chinese brought their food and placed it on the table. She sensed the undercurrent of Abernathy's words and still did not reply until the food was ready, the meat steaming in the bowl before them.

"He hates me, doesn't he, Jim?" she asked Abernathy.

"Yes," he said, the bitter fumes of jealousy coming up in his throat. "Lash hated you from the beginning. He blames you for what happened in the

Stinson affair. He hates your father and me. He was tough and brutal on the ranch, Gloria. He's mean and bitter now."

Maria laughed, sensing the tension between the two. "Lash? No, he is not mean and bitter. In the hospital bed when I took care of his wound he laughed much. He is a good man."

Silence fell among them. They ate. Over in a corner four musicians were playing. Two officers at the bar were arguing threateningly with the Chinese. The front door opened. A man pushed in; fat, pudgy, scowling. He went up the stairs.

"That is General Minor," Maria explained to Abernathy. "He drinks much. Francisco Villa does not like for his soldiers to drink."

"Then," the lawyer said, "he ought to come over here and have a look around."

"Oh, he does," Maria explained. "He comes to eat with his Generals. La Gorda is his good friend."

La Gorda passed by. She had just yelled in Spanish at a scurrying Chinese. The four Generals wanted another bottle.

"How are you kids doing?" she asked the two girls. "Food all right?"

"You know it is," Gloria replied. "And you're a dear."

La Gorda said, to Abernathy, "This poor kid came in here when Orozco's men had over run the country. He was military Governor until Pancho whipped the pants off him. I kept her here, threatening to shoot any officer who even looked at her. Then the fighting started—*Oyez!* Look who's come. Eduardo, you dog-goned Americano!" she yelled.

Gloria looked. It was Lash. He had stepped through the door and stood with bag in hand. She saw with a woman's eyes all that was in his unshaved face. He had spotted them and then turned away.

She saw, too, that he had been drinking.

La Gorda waddled to the foot of the stairway. She flung her arms around him, her bellows drowning out the babel in the patio. "Eduardo! I thought for a minute you were another drunken General with his woman. Come on in here!"

Gloria waited, the food suddenly having lost its taste. Lash was talking with La Gorda. He had ignored them, his face turned away. Gloria Holden stole a glance at Maria Elena Chacon. She saw something in a woman's eyes that another woman could not mistake.

SHE smiled, the smile an effort that cost her much, and she said to the girl, "He is your friend. Shall we go see him?"

"Yes," Maria answered. "He is my good friend."

Gloria put down her napkin and rose in the face of Jim Abernathy's open scowl. He obviously didn't like it.

He said, half gruntingly, "So you'd run to a man who hates you?"

"Don't forget why he's here. And don't forget your manners also, Jim. He and Maria are old friends."

They crossed the patio and men's eyes followed them. The Generals forgot their quarrel, the Villa money left where it was on the table. Gloria went to Lash, some strange feeling long absent coming back again. It had always been that way in his presence. He was talking with La Gorda in rapid Spanish, only a word or two of which she could get. She heard the name of Buck Stinson. It was followed by the word *"telefono."*

He turned his back on them and went into La Gorda's office.

"What is it?" Maria asked breath-

lessly.

La Gorda smiled and patted the Mexican girl on the shoulder. "That damned Buck Stinson who's been making eyes at you is a colorado spy here for Colonel Argumendo, the Red Flagger. Ed's calling the railroad station to get word to Villa. Get back to your tables, kids. In just about ten minutes they'll be busting this place wide open."

They didn't go back just then. They waited. In the office Lash had put up the receiver and returned.

"I got the station," he said to La Gorda. "The rest is up to Villa."

"Aren't you going to speak with me, Ed?" Gloria asked, extending her hand.

"Yes," he said, and she saw the bitterness in his tired, unshaved face. "I'm glad you're all right. Your fiance was worried. Maria!"

He had turned to the Mexican girl, holding both hands in his own. He was saying, in English, "You took good care of me, *machachita.*"

"It was nothing," Maria said. "You were a good soldier. You fought hard and bravely in the *revolucion.*"

She had slipped up in her precise English. The word was revolution. La Gorda said, "All right, you three. There's going to be trouble. You two kids get back to your tables. Ed, I've got a room for you. I dumped your friend out of the corner one and saved it for you because it's the best. Hurry it up, kids."

Gloria Holden looked at Lash. She saw the expression on Maria's white skinned face. The wounded adored that girl, she knew. She was a *rico* who had suffered much in the revolution. She was more than that. She tended their wants, patiently, tenderly, and yet she was an aristocrat; of the *hacendados.* The landed ones.

"Hurry it up, kids," La Gorda said. "Get back to your table and sit quiet and say nothing. They'll be here in a minute. Come on, Ed. You and I are going to have a drink. Remember the last one when you came down with your boss from Texas to buy some cattle and drive them back? You packed him up to his room."

Gloria led the way back to the table. They sat down. Abernathy had forgotten the rest of the food, now cold.

"Well?" he said. "So you saw him?"

"Yes," she said. "I saw him, Jim. It gives me a strange feeling."

"Why?"

"Because of the change that can come over a man. Do you remember when he first came to the ranch?"

He nodded with ill grace. This thing he didn't like. She was reminiscing, looking back.

"He was," she said, "a different man then. I liked Lash from the first. I liked him because he was quiet and efficient and didn't drink."

"He's drinking now," Jim Abernathy said. "Look."

Lash was drinking. He and La Gorda had a bottle between them on the short bar at the west side of the room. They were laughing about something that was apparently funny.

"The food," Maria exclaimed. "You have forgotten it. Let us eat."

They went back to the meal now, dining desultorily; waiting. La Gorda had slapped Lash on the back. Gloria looked and wondered if he was getting drunk.

She had never seen him drunk. He had been different. Steward and Whitley and the others, yes. Swaggering, gun packing, vain.

RUFE STINSON'S handsome face came back again, why she didn't know. Perhaps because of Lash. Memories were playing tricks on her. It was ages ago that Rufe, whiskey on his

breath, had tried to embrace her while she laughed at him. God and some kind of a bitter fate had sent that ugly big Texan over by the bar around the corner of the bunkhouse.

She could still see the first flush of anger on Rufe's face. She heard his curses at the man he hated.

"So you think she's sweet on you, do you?" Stinson had yelled as he turned.

Lash. The quiet, deadly calm of his ugly face. He had said, "Sorry, Rufe, but I didn't intend to intrude. I'm not one to bust in upon young love."

The last words for her; hard, biting, cynical. He had hated her, treated her with contempt.

Then gunfire. Hard, smashing roars of a six shooter and a man's lax body falling in the dirt at her feet. And another man, the big pistol low at his hip, standing with blank, unemotional face.

She remembered his words. They would forever be etched in her memory. She had only wanted to hurt him, to arouse him. Her reward had been a few words. "Well, there's your lover. Now you can switch to his brother."

Maria's voice brought her back to the present. "Listen! I hear horses. They are coming. Remember—sit quiet and say nothing."

The hoofbeats drew nearer and then came to a clattering halt. The double front doors burst inward, swinging wide in the wake of thirty dismounted men led by an officer. He shouted something in Spanish, an order.

Then bedlam broke loose.

Bootsteps hit the stairways as rifle carrying soldiers went up and began to pound on doors with the butts of their weapons. The patio swarmed. A table was overturned and LaGorda's voice said, "That's like them. He isn't here but they'll rip the place apart anyhow."

Gloria saw the four generals. They were paying no attention. The stakes on that hand were high. They were shouting at each other. La Gorda's big, fat figure came waddling away from the bar, into the middle of the patio. She looked up and Gloria looked up to. A man was standing above, braced in front of his room, a pistol in his hand.

"Put it down, you fat pig!" La Gorda yelled at him in Spanish.

The man was General Minor. He was waving the revolver and shouting oaths threatening to shoot any dog of a peon soldier who insulted him by trying to search his room.

It was about then that Gloria Holden saw the two soldiers duck out of the kitchen, back of them. They converged on the table, shouting, pointing to Abernathy. Maria began to scream in Spanish. Gloria heard "No, no, no!" but that was all.

They had Abernathy by the shoulders, hauling him up from the table.

The officer bored in, pistol in hand. More soldiers came running. They saw the Americano in the hands of the two. They had been told to look for a big Americano staying at La Gorda's hotel. This was a big Americano. A spy. Fuentes the Butcher, the *colorado!*

Maria's hand grabbed that of the American girl and jerked her back from what had become a struggling mass of men. The four Generals had risen, pistols out. Maria screamed again, the cry lost in bedlam.

Somewhere amid the noise and confusion Gloria Holden heard a stentorian roar. She caught a glimpse of a man hurtling forward.

It was Ed Lash.

He hit the struggling, weaving pile of soldiers, staccato Spanish streaming from his lips. He went in, flinging man after man aside, his big shoulders lost in the mass of struggling bodies. He yelled something at a General, flung another man aside, and was in above

Abernathy, down under a dozen clutching hands.

ONE of the Generals cried out something. She heard, *"El hombre de los amatralledoras. El Americano!"* She heard the words *"Senor Lash."*

Then the mass parted, fell apart. In the center stood Lash. He had a pistol in one hand, the other gripping Abernathy by the shoulder. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

"What are they saying?" cried out Gloria to Maria.

But the Mexican girl stood transfixed, her eyes on Lash. He was talking rapid Spanish to one of the card playing Generals. The General had wheeled on the officer. He was cursing.

In the center stood La Gorda, hands on her hips.

"Dogs! Robbers! Thieves!" she was bellowing in English. "Go on—tear down the place. *Hijos de—*" She went off into Spanish curses again.

"They are saying that this is Senor Lash, the American machine gunner of Francisco Villa," Maria burst out to Gloria. "The Generals are very mad. They are ordering them out of the hotel. It is all right now."

The place quieted down as the soldiers began to file out. The Generals had gone back to their table. Abernathy sat down. He was shaken, scowling. But Gloria's eyes were on the figure of Ed Lash. He had gone back to the bar to La Gorda.

They were pouring a drink, and roaring with laughter.

La Gorda's voice said, "You know, Ed, for thirty years I've been swearing I'd throw over the whole works and go back to the states. But I'd die of boredom. I hate to admit it but I love Mexico and these damned fighting Mexicans."

An officer standing beside Gloria nudged another officer and spoke in a low voice. They nodded toward Lash and La Gorda, who were still laughing.

"What did they say?" she asked Maria.

Maria's eyes were still on Lash. Her face was flushed. "They say—they say," she said a little breathlessly, "that all Americans are crazy and they're glad they're Mexicans and have some sense."

CHAPTER VIII

LASH finished his drink. He wasn't drunk. But the liquor and the fight had, he realized, released the tension holding him tight in its grips during the past days.

"You say you have a room?" he asked La Gorda.

"That corner one up there to the left. I put you friend in another." She removed a key from her belt and handed it to him. "I have to keep the doors locked. Pancho, bless his tough little hide, shoots any soldier caught looting, but you know how it is with an army in town. They steal everything from salt shakers to pillows. They even ripped out one of the wash basins in the corner. Had water spewing all over the place. What do you want for supper? Tostados and meat?"

He nodded, put down his empty glass.

"All right," La Gorda replied. "Go on up and clean up a bit. I'll have the food sent over to the table where your friends are."

He went over to the stairs, picked up his bag, and ascended the dry, creaky steps to the porch above the patio. As he reached the corner the door next to his opened. General Minor, respendent in a clean uniform with black and gold trimings on the sleeves and lapels, came out.

"Good evening, mi General," Lash said in Spanish.

"So you have come back to spy again?" General Minor said.

"No, mi General. This day I have become a cavalryman."

"First you were a cowardly machine gunner who disobeyed orders. Then you say you are a reporter. Now you are of the cavalry. I give you twenty-four hours to leave Mexico or be shot as a spy."

"It is impossible, mi General," Lash grinned. "Would you have me report to General Villa such words? I saved your life once when you were to be shot after the fight with the Rurales. Such ingratitude to an American."

He left General Minor's muttered imprecations and went inside. The General descended to the patio for supper. Lash unpacked, shaved, shook the dust from his suit, and went down again. He threaded his way among the tables and Abernathy, remembering his manners, rose.

Lash sat down beside Maria. The liquor had unbent him a little. He was hungry.

"Sorry about the fuss, Jim," he said, forgetting for the moment what lay between them because of the two girls. "It was a mistake, that's all. But he won't get away. If he's in Chihuahua City, Villa's men will ferret him out no matter where he's hiding."

"It could have been worse, I suppose," Abernathy said shortly. "But I think I've had enough of Mexico to last me a lifetime."

"I said they play for keeps."

The Chinese who had been serving them came threading his way from the kitchen, above his head a big platter covered by a white cloth. He placed it on the table in front of Lash.

"*Chilis encurtidos tambein,*" Ed Lash added. He liked pickled Chilis.

The waiter nodded and went back to the kitchen. Lash began to eat the crusty, flat tortillas heaped with beans, chopped lettuce and tomatoes and cucumbers. He cut a slice of the roast. In the corner the four musicians had resumed singing.

"I remained at the foot of a green maguey.
My ungrateful love went away with another.
I awoke to the song of a lark;
Oh, what a hangover I have, and the barkeeps won't trust me!

"Oh, God, take away this sickness!
I feel as if I were surely going to die.
The Virgin of pulque and whiskey must save me;
Oh, what a hangover and nothing to drink!"

Maria's aristocratic face had grown serious. She was looking at Lash and not listening to the musicians. "And to think," she said, "that this Señor Buck Stinson—this big American who came to the nurse cars to take me to the cinema and asked me to marry him—he is a colorado. With Argumendo. I did not know."

"Not many Americans are with the Federals, regulars or the Red Flaggers," Lash said. "You have to renounce your American citzenship. But with a man like Argumendo he could get around it all right."

"I WAS glad to see Buck when he first arrived," Gloria said. "It was good to see somebody you knew, even if he was Rufe's brother."

It was a slip up, that last. Lash knew she hadn't meant to bring up something that was bitter to them all. He tried to cover up, but Maria Elena cut in.

"Ah, now I know, Eduardo. This man is your enemy. Gloria told me. You fought with his brother with a pistol, is it not so?"

"Yes," Lash said. "But it's all passed, *machachita*. There is much more of importance ahead."

Abernathy had been looking at General Minor, sitting over at another table, wracking his brain for a way to convey Stinson's message. He knew of none. He couldn't talk Spanish and the General didn't understand English. Any man who interpreted would have to be a friend of the General's and against Villa.

Lash's words brought back the problem which had brought them from Puerta Prieta.

"By the way, Ed," he asked. "Any luck on the business with Villa."

Lash set down his coffee cup and wiped his lips with the napkin. He concentrated his attention upon the food. He nodded. "You're all fixed up on a special pass. You can stay with the reporters in their car any time you wish and are allowed to go any place with other reporters and cameramen."

The bait again. Lash was dangling it in front of him.

"You know I don't mean that," Abernathy replied irritably. "I mean the other—about the cattle."

"I told him the setup. He signed the order to General Gonzales."

"Good! I can get the morning train back to Juarez. And you'd better come with me, Gloria. Your father has been frantic."

"Not so fast," Ed Lash said to him. He was grinning again. "The order is post dated."

The lawyer's face darkened in a disappointed scowl. "But that's costing us a thousand or fifteen hundred dollars a day for every day of delay!"

"Villa knows that," Lash answered complacently. "That's why he didn't telegraph. It's why the order is post dated."

Jim Abernathy shrugged off his disappointment. He laid a hand, palm up, on the table. "All right. I suppose we'll just have to make out. But let me have it and I'll be at the line waiting the moment it's good."

"No hurry," was the reply. "If the *soldados* got hold of you again, you might lose it. I'd better hang on to it for awhile."

General Minor, his supper done, pushed back his chair and rose. He waddled his way among the tables and went back upstairs again. The door of his room, next to the corner one assigned by La Gorda to Lash, closed behind his fat figure.

Lash finished the meal. They rose leisurely as one and went over to the cash register at the bar. La Gorda was presiding over it. He pulled out a handful of gold coins and the Villa money.

"Which?" he asked, grinning at her.

"You know which, you dog-goned Americano, but give me the Villa currency," La Gorda laughed. "I've got bales of it. It's worth eighteen cents American now. When he becomes President it will be worth more."

He paid her while the others waited. It was quite dark outside now, the streets lit dimly by small bulbs mounted high on telephone poles. General Minor had come out of his room up above the patio and was signalling to a Chinese waiter. Probably another bottle, Lash thought.

"Will you walk back with us to the train, Ed?" Gloria asked.

"Yes," he said. "With Maria. She's my *querida enfermera*—my sweetheart nurse."

The Chinese waiter came down the

steps again and moved silently toward Abernathy. He whispered something in his ear.

"I've got to go upstairs for a few minutes," the lawyer said. "Will you wait for me?"

"No," Lash said. "Maria and I will walk on alone."

He left with the girl, leaving Gloria behind. They went out into the warm night. A group of soldiers, rifles jogging over their shoulders, trotted by on horseback, white bands on their arms. They were mounted police-soldiers, helping the five hundred other foot soldiers-police to keep order. Lash wondered about Stinson. He knew the search would go on through the night, that word would be sent to all patrols out in the desert.

HE wasn't worried about Buck now. The matter was in the hands of Francisco Villa.

Lash put his arm through that of the Mexican girl. They walked back toward the trains, past the milling soldiers, ever on the walk, moving restlessly. The army was well fed and getting impatient. There was nothing to do for them all. Some took turns at their stations in the street railways, the power system, the slaughterhouse, the flour mills and shops that Villa now was operating. But there was not enough work for all.

"How long," Lash asked, "has Gloria been with you?"

"Two weeks now in the trains. She was here when we came. She is so good," Maria finished.

"And you are going back with her to Arizona when the revolution is done and the cannon are silent?"

"Yes, I have nothing here now, Eduardo. My parents—my brothers—they are gone. I am alone."

He said, "No, Maria. You are not alone. I am with you."

They had come into the shadows of the armored train at the edge of the yards, not far from the streets. He stopped, turned her to face him. He bent down and kissed her.

"Maria, will you go with me to the priest? Tonight?" he asked.

"To the priest? To marry you?"

"Yes," he answered simply.

She lay close to him, the beat of her heart plain through his coat. She had both arms clasped around his waist. "No, Eduardo," she replied.

"Why? I am going south with the armies."

"I know. I saw it in your face tonight. No, Eduardo, it is not that. It is Gloria."

"What about her?" he demanded roughly.

"She loves you very much, Eduardo," Maria Elena answered simply.

"I hate her," he said harshly.

"She loves you," the girl repeated. "She talked of you much on the train. She said she had caused you to kill a man, but she never mentioned who until tonight when we met Buck Stinson not far from the hotel. No, Eduardo, you do not hate her. I am a woman and I know."

It was useless to argue further with this Mexican girl. He saw it in the saddened face. The face of a young woman, almost a girl yet, who had suffered so much. Perhaps, though, Maria thought he was pitying her. He tried again.

"It is not so. And you care not enough for me to go to with me to the priest. Is there another man?"

"There has never been another—a man at all, Eduardo," she said, trying to laugh again. "I am a pawn in the revolution. I can not give up and leave where my parents and my brothers gave all. You understand?"

He nodded and released her. "I will see you again as the trains go south."

"Of course, Eduardo. And now will you go? I want to walk alone before returning to the train. I shall be all right."

He left her and went down the street where the *soldados* still milled restlessly and men squatted where there was light enough to see greasy cards and where music and laughter came from the cantinas. Suddenly he felt tired. More tired than he had been in years. He retraced his footsteps by a side street.

He was somehow glad that he hadn't met Gloria Holden and Jim Abernathy.

CHAPTER IX

AS FOR Abernathy, he had, back at the hotel, gone up the steps and left Gloria to wait. He was puzzled and a little uneasy. The Chinese waitter merely had whispered in broken English that General Minor had commanded his presence in the General's room at once.

What the devil did Minor want? He hated all Americans, and he couldn't speak with Abernathy because the lawyer didn't speak Spanish. Perhaps the General knew a few words and could get along with the dozen or so Abernathy had learned.

He reached the porch above the patio, glanced down and noticed that Gloria was studying a calendar on the wall before starting over to talk with La Gorda, and gently knocked on General Minor's door.

It opened at once, as though somebody had been waiting. Somebody had. It was Buck Stinson. The General sat in a chair, a bottle of Monople Champagne on the table beside him.

"Hello, Jim," grinned the renegade with obvious expectation. "Surprise, eh?" He closed the door.

"Very much. I am, in fact, astonished. They tore this hotel apart looking for you."

Stinson waved him to another chair. "I know it. I was peeping through a crack in the door."

Abernathy stared at him. "You were here in this hotel during the rumpus?"

Buck Stinson nodded, grinning. "What the devil do you think the General here was doing outside that door with a pistol? Sure, Jim. After I left here I ran into Maria and Gloria and talked to them for a minute. I hadn't got far away until I saw Lash coming from the direction of the yards and carrying his bag. Something hit me like a flash. Lash was going to find out from either the girls or La Gorda that I've been staying here. Just a kind of hunch, Jim, that in about thirty minutes they'd be ripping the town apart looking for me. So I ducked back here and slid up the back stairs and managed to get in without being seen. I figured it would be the safest place in town. It was. I'd also remembered that you couldn't get an interpreter unless he was against Villa, and there aren't but about two guys in this town that are against him—me and the General."

"Que paso?" snapped out General Minor.

"He says what happens?" Stinson nodded and then introduced them. He spoke rapid Spanish as Abernathy shook a pudgy hand. The other hand held a champagne glass. A water tumbler almost full.

General Minor spoke back in rapid Spanish. Again Stinson translated.

"He wants to know what you've got against Lash that you would make friends and want to kill this American. I told him about the cattle deal. I threw

in Gloria for good measure. Now wait a minute! Don't start getting sore, Jim. The General might not understand about the cattle deal—he might even side with Lash as long as General Gonzales and three hundred of his men are getting fat on good beef belonging to an American. But a girl is something any Mexican can understand. That one don't need any explanation. Just throw in a girl and you've got a Mexican on your side. Down here they kill a man every five minutes for fooling around with another man's girl. Anyhow," Stinson added with that coarse grin, "it's the truth. I've been watching the whole show through that crack in the door. I could see you four eating supper and I could see Gloria's face. All she was looking at was Ed Lash. Then that ruckus when the soldiers grabbed you. That Lash is rough in a fight, the way he plowed through those Mexicans. I couldn't have done better myself."

Abernathy declined the proffered drink and then, when he saw Stinson's slight shake of the head, quickly took it. The General might think an American was too good to drink his good champagne. He began to speak, with Stinson translating.

"Let us get at this matter," he said. "You came with this dog of another American to get an order from General Villa releasing your cattle in Sonora?"

Abernathy nodded. "That is correct, General. The cattle are ours. We bought the land from Mexicans. We bought the cattle from Mexicans. We paid good salaries to the Mexicans who operated the holdings. But now we can not get them back."

"Why?"

"Because General Gonzales hates all Americans."

THIS was a pretty big lie, Abernathy knew, but a gamble that he must take. If Minor knew about the killing of the soldiers by Gila men he might react in a manner quite unhealthy for one of the owners. You could never tell about these Mexicans; they were fiery, explosive, unpredictable.

"Why does he hate the Americans?" the Mexican demanded.

Abernathy shrugged. "That I do not know, General," he answered.

"Ah," sighed the pudgy man in the chair. "What dogs and liars so many people are. Old Gonzales is a dog and you, like all Americans, are a liar. You think I do not know of the telegram from Gonzales about Americans murdering some of our rebel soldiers? No, do not get upset, my friend. When the revolution is beaten Huerta will make Mexico a land for the ricos—even the damned lying Gringos. We will all be rich and these peon dogs who now fight against the Government will howl a different tune when we put the lash to their backs and make them work in the fields. It makes no difference. You want back your cattle in Arizona. You can not get them back because this man Lash, that you hate, will not give you the order from Villa, no?"

"Quite correct," nodded the lawyer.

Minor refilled his glass, sighed again, and stretched out a bit further in the chair in order to release the pressure on his huge belly and allow him to breathe more freely. He thoughtfully drank a swallow that rumbled as it went down his gullet, wiped his mustachios with the back of a hand, and fixed his small black eyes upon Jim Abernathy's face.

"So what would you have me do?" he demanded.

"Help me get the order and—"

"And let you go on the train to Juarez again and leave Fuentes and me to kill your bird?"

"Of course not, General!"

"Then why don't you shoot the dog

in his room tonight, or better yet, use a knife while he sleeps? You would rid yourself of the man who would steal your woman. You would have the paper you are after. Is the truth?"

Abernathy had to admit to himself that it certainly was. Minor was looking at the thing from the direct and simple point of view. A man wants your woman. You kill the dog. He has something you want. You kill the dog. Very simple. But what this traitor to Villa couldn't understand, from Jim Abernathy's point of view, was that intelligent men don't kill. If it must be done, then they let some man of lesser intelligence—some man like Buck Stinson or General Minor—do the dirty work. Then if there are any repercussions, the man of superior intelligence has proven it by being in the clear.

That too, in case the General didn't know it, was direct and to the point. A man wants your woman. You hire somebody to kill him. He has something you want. You hire somebody to kill him.

The big problem was how to convey to these two men that a man like Jim Abernathy had too many brains to kill Lash.

"Yes, General," the lawyer said slowly, thinking fast. "That is the truth —much in what you say. But there are many things to be considered."

"Of course," nodded the Mexican, almost sneering. "Such as how he can be done to death and you take no risk." He turned to Stinson, who had been interpreting word for word, and grinned thinly. "This dog would have his enemy killed but he wants somebody else to do it while he goes safely with the woman and the release order for the cattle. He is a more than a dog—he is a coward too."

Stinson grinned back and then said to Abernathy, after he had translated: "This old boy is pretty shrewd, Jim, even if he is a traitor. But he's right and you damn well know it. You're too slick and smooth, Jim—and I'm still remembering that you would have defended Lash for killing Rufe if he hadn't ducked across the line into Mexico to avoid facing trial."

Abernathy felt impatience rising within him; impatience and a growing sense of irritation. All right, these two men seemed to be pretty good at talking and even throwing both open and veiled insults. He could talk straight too.

He began to talk.

CHAPTER X

GLORIA was still talking with La Gorda downstairs. The big woman was in a jovial mood from the drinks and because Lash was back. It was good to have so many Americans around again. Most of the time her hotel was filled with Mexican officers and the few American soldiers-of-fortune who had been lucky at gambling or received a little of their back pay. These she didn't like. Not a woman who had been in Mexico half her life. They were ragged, ratty, thieving. Some had come for adventure; a pretty large percentage of them had come for loot. Plenty of them had police records in the states and had found it convenient to come down and help in the fight to establish a new Republic.

They got drunk, insulted her and the help, and stole everything they could get their hands on. Thank God most of them were broke all the time and couldn't afford a hotel room.

La Gorda went off into laughter again about the fight. Gloria waited, smiling. She loved this big woman who had so fiercely protected her from drunk and demanding generals both before and after the coming of Villa's

armies.

"I never asked you how long you've known Lash," she said to La Gorda. "It must have been quite awhile."

"Four or five years, I guess," the big woman said. "He used to come down pretty often on cattle buying trips. He knows Mexican cattle like few Americans do. Did anybody ever tell you that it was Lash who helped select for the Mexican broker the stock that Gila bought and put on its Sonora holdings?"

Gloria looked at her in siurprise. "Why, no, Dad never mentioned it. You mean he knew my father down here?"

La Gorda waggled her head and the jelly-like jowls bobbled. "That's right. Your father stayed here at the hotel, as I told you before, when he came down to make the deal. Lash was here. He'd just quit a man over in Texas who turned out to be a cheap skate in the matter of a bonus on another deal. He was hanging around for a few days when your father came on the buying trip. Colonel Holden hired him to look over the cattle and see that the Mexican broker didn't skin him. When it was over your father offered Lash a job in Arizona and Lash said he guessed he would think it over. I never knew whether he took it or not."

"He took it," Gloria answered, and then told of how she had come to know him. She made no mention of the shooting. La Gorda might already known about it through some mysterious means she had of getting news from everywhere, but if so she had said nothing. La Gorda could, when occasion demanded, be very discreet.

Abernathy came down the stairs about that time. The women had been absorbed in talk and had not noticed. He came over and said, "Just a couple of things I had to see about upstairs. Are you ready to go, Gloria? Sorry I kept you waiting so long."

"All right," she said; and to La Gorda, "Good night. See you tomorrow."

They went out into the evening, Gloria's eyes unconsciously searching the streets for the figures of Lash and little Maria. They were nowhere in sight. Abernathy took her arm and they moved along the street past shuffling, restless soldiers, heading over toward the yards. He appeared half in the notion of steering her down for perhaps a drink in a cafe, but she had no desire to do anything except get back to the nurse car.

They walked along for some time in silence, and finally she said, "Jim, there's something that's puzzling me. I want an answer that you can supply."

"Gladly, Gloria, gladly. Suppose we drop over to the telegraph station and wire your father that you're all right."

"Very well."

They changed direction and came out into a broader street where the light was better. From over in the yards came the pant of the ten big engines, as though they were tired or impatient to be moving. Now and then a firebox gave off a burst of flame and a column of smoke shot up from the smokestack as though the monster had suddenly belched rumblingly. Far out in the desert the camp fires still glowed like a thousand fireflies at rest. From somewhere in the distance came the sounds of singing. They always seemed to be singing, these thousands of Mexicans who fought, and then died by the thousands.

"IT'S about Ed Lash," Gloria said. "I know that he has no use for me. I know how he feels about Dad, who was so mad over the Stinson affair. I've never understood yet why Dad liked Rufe and Buck Stinson so well—

enough that after the shooting he swore he'd hang Lash. To begin with, I found out from La Gorda tonight that Lash had a hand in establishing our holdings in Sonora. Is that true?"

"I once heard the Colonel say that he had something to do with it?" he admitted.

"Then why would he turn on a man who had helped him out so much?" she demanded. "Rufe wasn't worth Lash. A dozen Rufe's weren't worth a man like Lash."

"Go ahead, rub it in," he grunted out.

"I'm sorry, Jim. I just want to know. And you haven't answered my question."

"Your father knew Lash was a good man, Gloria. But being his daughter, what you fail to understand is that Colonel Holden is a man of iron will and iron discipline. The shooting of Stinson was in direct violation of his strict orders to his men that there never, under any circumstances, would be any gunplay on the ranch. Your father couldn't back down from that rule. It would—well, show him up in front of the other men."

"In other words," she countered, "it would show that Dad had finally met a man with as much iron in him as Dad has. So it was a foolish and stubborn pride that made my father threaten to hang the man who had done so much for him."

He didn't answer for a moment. He was remembering all too vividly that few minutes in his office in Puerta Prieta when Lash had clashed with the Colonel and would have shot it out with Whitley and Steward, ignoring Colonel Holden, sneering in his face. Abernathy compressed his lips at the memory and said nothing. It would do no good, he thought, to let her know that Lash not only had proven himself harder and tougher and even meaner than the Colonel; it would certainly be a hundred—yes, a thousand times worse that during all the negotiations in the office Ed Lash had not once mentioned that he had anything to do with getting those cattle for the Colonel.

The lawyer could imagine Lash's feelings at being offered a one dollar bonus to get those same cattle across the line into Arizona.

He said, "Lash is a soured, hard bitten man, Gloria. The Colonel paid him for his services. So, pride or no pride, your father was right. Lash disobeyed his orders and shot Stinson on the ranch. There's nothing more to be said."

"There is," she said quietly, "quite a lot more to be said. Lash hates my father and me, yet he shows up down here to get an order from Villa to get our cattle back across from Mexico into Arizona. Why? Why would he be so willing to do it for Dad?"

"Because," he said gruffly, "he's getting a bonus of two dollars a head for anywhere from three thousand to thirty five hundred head. Isn't that plenty of reason for a man like him who always worked for wages?"

"No," she answered. "It's not. I won't ask you why. But some instinct —call it womanly intuition, if you wish —tells me that isn't the only reason. There's something else back of it. But I won't embarrass you by asking. I'll embarrass Dad."

That was about all they said until they finally came into the street where the railroad station was and threaded their way through the crowds into where the telegraph key was clicking. Fortunately for them, there happened to be a Mexican Captain of Infantry in charge who spoke English. He took the message, scanned it carefully, then shook his head. There might be something of

value in it which, if the Federals had tapped the line, would give information to the enemy. Abernathy thought of his reporter's pass and produced it. This immediately changed matters.

The message was sent.

They went out into the night again and into the yards. Between all the trains on each track the fires still burned. Others had died to beds of coals where men, wrapped to their eyes in blankets, sat talking and singing. From flat cars and box cars alike came voices, the sound of children crying, and loud snores telling of full supper stomachs. It had not always been this way. They had gone hungry, sometimes for days, foraging for food when there was no food to be found.

NOW it was different. The land was rich and bountiful and Don Pancho had provided much. It was well to eat now. Tomorrow . . . next week . . . next month there would be no food again. No food, and hunger.

"I wish," Abernathy said, after a particularly long silence, "that you would get this foolish idea out of your head about going on south with the armies. Why? What does it amount to in the end?"

"I said," she reminded him, "that I wanted to get away and be alone for awhile, Jim. The Stinson affair was not the real reason. It was an incentive. You see, Jim, I've never been alone. I was born on an Army post, when Dad was a mere First Lieutenant. The early years of my life were calvary and drilling soldiers and caissons. And bugles. I never forgot the bugles. I used to hear them in my sleep when I was a child. When mother finally left Dad because she hated the Army, I was big enough to be given the choice. I went with him because she never understood anybody but herself. That divorce was what caused him to resign his career and take up ranching in Arizona. In a way, it was the same thing on the Gila ranch. Men obeying orders, men moving, men working; and as usual there were no women to speak of."

"All right," he answered. "I'll understand that. But that doesn't make sense when I find you down here among the Mexicans playing nurse in a rebel army. It just doesn't add up. It's almost foolish."

They were passing the string of water tank cars where a few women were standing about in the night, gossiping as they filled pots for the breakfast tortilla dough.

"Doesn't it?" she said. "They say what a child once learns it never forgets. I never forgot the Armies and the bugles. You can hear them early in the morning. Sometimes it sounds as though every man in Villa's army—nine thousand of them—are carrying bugles. So it was good to get back, because it will be my last chance at freedom. When I go back to the ranch I'll stay. I'll marry some man and stay there and grow old. Now do you understand?"

"No," he said stubbornly. "But about the marrying part, yes." He stopped all of a sudden an turned her to face him. "I told Lash I was going to marry you," he added.

Her eyes looked up at him and he couldn't tell whether they were curious, silently laughing, or speculative. He knew she had on occasion deliberately let him bring the subject of marriage almost to the dangerous point, and he had taken the meanings back of it for a half promise. His confidence in himself had made him certain of the outcome. He had gotten nearly everything in life so far that he had wanted, and he would get the one more thing.

"Yes?" she asked. "And what did Lash say?"

"Nothing. He probably was thinking in that hard bitten way that it was a damned poor bargain for the both of us. But he did ask me when the wedding is to come off."

"So that's why he referred to you tonight as my fiance? I thought it was bitter irony."

"Will you marry me, Gloria?"

"I might," she answered frankly, "if the time ever comes when I felt so. Right now I don't."

It was like a hot needle to his sudden anger and jealousy. Every mention of Lash's name brought the man in between them like some malignant barrier. Abernathy was glad of the talk he had had with Stinson and General Minor. It helped to put down the feeling of bitter frustration. He could wait. When Lash was out of the way she would see differently; that this man standing before her was the only man fit to be her husband.

They came to the nurses' car and there she turned, something defensively expectant in her mein. He saw it and made no attempt to kiss her goodnight. "You'd better go now, Jim," she told him. "Villa is very strict where his nurses are concerned. He doesn't want them turning into soldaderas to follow their men. Women carrying children do not make good nurses."

"All right. I'll get back to the hotel. See you tomorrow?"

For some strange reason she laughed. She appeared not to have heard the question. She said, "Lash is going south with the armies as a cavalryman and a good cavalryman needs a soldadera. Good night, Jim."

She swung up the steel ladder to the doorway and went inside. The car was partitioned off into snug bunks, two girls sharing each cubbyhole. She went down the aisle to the end one and stepped inside and lit a candle.

Maria should have been back by now.

Suddenly Gloria Holden remembered the joking remark she had made to Abernathy about Lash needing a soldadera, and now it turned to bitter gall.

CHAPTER XI

LASH had walked around restlessly for a while, somehow loathe to return to the hotel and go to bed, tired though he was. He dropped into a Chinese Cafe, had himself a drink, watched a poker game, and finally went out. He felt the night in his face and the world became a strange place where a man's feelings were caught up in a swirl of emotion and sucked down, down into a dark abyss, into bottomless depths.

He returned and went to bed. As he stretched out between the sheets in his shorts Jim Abernathy knocked at the door and then came in. He didn't turn on the light.

"Asleep?" he asked.

"No," Lash said. "I just now crawled in. You didn't stay long at the train."

"It's against regulations. Villa is strict."

"For a man who unloads mules," yes," sarcastically.

"We stopped by the station and sent the Colonel a telegram to let him know Gloria is all right," Abernathy replied.

"Which ought to make the old bastard feel a lot better," Ed Lash said.

"He may be a stern and hard man but he loves his daughter."

Lash stirred and made no reply. He asked, "What do you want?"

"That order to General Gonzales from Villa. I want to leave on the morning train north. Give it to me, Ed."

Lash laughed softly at him in the

darkness. "Did she agree to go north with you, too?" he jeered at the man standing by the bureau.

"She refused. She's going on south with Maria when the armies move."

"So am I."

"With the armies or with Maria?" asked the lawyer quietly.

"That, my former friend, is something you would like very much to know. So of course I won't tell you. I'm disappointed with her. I thought a woman engaged to a man would jump at the opportunity to go with him."

Abernathy stirred in the darkness. He was fumbling for a cigarette. The match over his cupped hands lit up his strong face for a moment, then died. The face was a trifle pale from anger. Anger and jealousy.

"She wouldn't go. She's got some kind of foolish idea in her head that she wants a bit of freedom before she returns to Puerta Prieta to settle down and get married. Sounds foolish—even idiotic to me. But she's a strong willed woman and there was no use arguing. Part of it might be because she wants to wait for Maria to come with her. Anyhow, it doesn't matter at the moment. Things will work out all right. And now, for the last time, Ed, give me that order to General Gonzales."

"For the last time," Ed Lash said, "go to hell and get out of here. You played your hand your way. I'm playing it my way. Every day I can hold you here you lose more money. Every peon and every rebel soldier up there in Puerta Prieta gnawing away on a piece of Gila beef is gnawing away at your greed and ambition. Now get the hell and gone out of here so I can get some sleep."

Something like a sigh came from the lawyer. His figure stirred in the darkness of the room, toward the door.

"All right," Ed," he said, very softly. "So-long."

He went out onto the porch above the patio where all was quiet. The tables were cleaned up and set for breakfast the next morning. The Chinese servants had faded into the night. The place where the Generals, now sleeping off food and too much drink in their rooms, had quarreled was in dead silence. Abernathy went to his own room and set down to wait.

Lash rolled over and stretched out in the darkness, relaxing the muscles of his big frame. The faces were coming to haunt him. They floated past, as they had so many times before, and out of them came two lovely women. Lovely, aristocratic Maria with her arms clasped around his waist and her gentle, "No, Eduardo. She loves you," pounding through his tired brain. She and Gloria Holden, wisping by to make him turn restlessly again and again. He flung off the sheet and twisted over on his flat stomach.

He was tired from the long, almost sleepless train ride of fifty-six hours. The fight and the liquor had loosened his taut nerves. The food had pulled all the blood to his stomach.

HE SLEPT the sleep of the exhausted, the dreams for once, not coming to shriek their insidious way into his rest.

How long he slept he didn't know. It must have been hours, for when he awoke he was rested, wide awake, alert. Somebody was in the room. He had forgotten to lock the door before going to sleep.

"Quien es?" he snapped out in Spanish and rolled over fast at the same time. The knife slashed through the darkness to bury itself to the hilt in the mattress still warm from the heat of his body. Instinct caused him to

grab for his assailant's wrist, which had driven the weapon downward. He got it, hard and bony in his grasp, and jerked hard toward him, rolling again. They went off the bed on the back side, down against the wall.

Lash slashed at the man's face with his free hand and a grunt came. "I should have," he got out, "locked the door, but I'm glad I didn't."

"So am I," panted the other, straining.

"It'll save me a trip to Palacio Gomez, you yellow dog."

He was slashing again and again at Buck Stinson's face, their bodies locked together on the floor. Stinson still gripped the knife and was trying to jerk his wrist free. Spit that was part blood struck Ed Lash in the face, the spit of a wild, feril animal now revealed in his true colors. This was no longer an American or even a sane man. It was a *Colorado* executioner gone berserk.

"This . . . is better than a slug through the belly," he panted, swinging and then fumbling for a throat grip. "I've waited for this since you killed Rufe."

He got the grip on Ed Lash's throat and Lash put a palm under his chin, sinking two fingers deep into Stinson's eyes. The renegade let out a hoarse, muffled bawl of pain and the grip on Lash's throat relaxed.

He grabbed at Lash's wrist and Ed Lash pantingly told him, "So you're 'Major Fuentes' now, the Red Flagger riding with Argumendo and in here to spy on Villa? I was half sorry I had to kill Rufe. I'm not any more."

He slashed out in the darkness at a face whence now came curses not in English but in Spanish while they rolled and threshed and drove blows at each other. The bed's uncastored legs slid to one side, cutting splintery furrows in the dry plank floor. A hard driven knee went into Lash's groin and he suppressed a sharp groan of pain. He felt his grip slipping on the other's throat. But Stinson had lost the knife.

They had forgotten it. This was brute strength against brute strength, two big, powerful men bent upon killing the other.

The light switch suddenly clicked on. Lash caught sight of General Minor in the doorway, still dressed. He was weaving a little and held the ever present pistol in one hand. His bloodshot eyes saw the two men, grew apprehensive. He had waited in his room, he and Stinson, after concluding the deal with Abernathy; he had strained his ears for the thud, the faint sigh of a dying man. What had come was something like two snapping mastiffs locked in a snarling fight.

General Minor let out a curse and tried to level the pistol.

"Over, Fuentes!" he yelled in Spanish at Buck Stinson. "Roll the Gringo dog over so I can shoot him."

"Shut up, you old fool," the *colorado's* panting voice hissed back in reply. "Do you want . . . everybody in the hotel to hear. Now you've done it, you drunken . . ."

Lash's fist had stopped the rest of it. He threshed erect, slashing hard blows at Stinson's coarse, now apprehensive face, trying to daze him enough to hold his body between Lash and General Minor. The renegade's face was bloody and not a pretty thing to see. It was contorted with pain, anger, and a new fear. If anybody had overheard, Stinson knew he would not, this time, get away.

He fought back as Lash wrestled him around the end of the bed, toward the doorway where the General still stood weaving, his pistol levelled. Then

Lash lost his grip as Stinson broke free.

"Aha! Now I've got you, you Americano spy!" yelled General Minor.

"Oh, no you haven't," cut in La Gorda's voice from directly behind him. She had heard the fight and left her room. She had been witness to a thousand fights.

Her fat arm struck through the doorway past Minor's pudgy figure. The shot went slantingly through the floor and the gun clattered. Lash had closed in on Stinson again, driving hard blows at the taller man's face, and Buck Stinson reeled back. And Ed Lash, fighting strength into his trembling legs, went after him; hard, mercilessly, savagely.

FEAR that turned to panic seized the renegade. He whirled staggerinly toward the open window; and then he went through it. It was two stories to the ground.

From below came a soft thud, a yell mingled with a woman's scream, curses in Spanish. Ed Lash half fell into the window.

Stinson had regained his feet and was running down the street into the night. Directly below the window stood a *soldado,* his arm around the waist of his girl. The *soldado* was shaking his fist angrily.

"Carbone! Jelone!" he bawled at the top of his lungs. "I fight for Villa. I offer my life for the revolution. I chase the colorados and I am not afraid. I am the best soldier in the Constitutionalist Army. And when I get two minutes alone with my little dove in my arms a husband chases you out the window for stealing love. You jump out on top of us. Your mother was the grand daughter of a billy goat and your father was born in a dung pile of mule droppings! *Cabrone!"* he bawled again, fist uplifted indignantly.

Lash turned from the frustrated and interrupted lover. Out in the street people were running and shouting. A soldier added to the confusion by pulling his pistol and firing five shots into the air. Troopers came loping up to converge upon him, and Lash turned back from the window.

Only La Gorda stood alone in the doorway. General Minor had disappeared.

"What time is it?" he asked weakly and went over to sit down on the bed, hands holding his groin.

"Around two in the morning. What happened, Ed?"

She was rewrapping the faded robe about her great figure, drawing the waist strings tight. She had picked up General Minor's revolver.

"Where's the General?" he asked.

La Gorda took a step or two backward, far enough to peer into the next room. She stepped back. "Why . . . I guess that fat, liquor guzzling pig has gone, Ed. Say—what's this all about anyhow?"

Tersely he told her, yanking on his pants and shirt. The pain in his groin had subsided somewhat, strength flowing back into his legs once more. "They're gone without a doubt," he said. "Damn me for a stupid fool, Estell. Minor must be working with Stinson against Villa, probably for Argumendo. A spy for the Federals. If they get through Villa's patrols and into the desert to Palacio Gomez, Argumendo will telegraph General Velasco in Torreon complete information about the number of Villa's trains, his guns, and the size of his armies. This thing is serious."

"I'll get on the phone," La Gorda said. "If Pancho lets 'em get away a second time I'll put arsenic in his tortillas the next time he comes over to eat with his generals. I don't mind

this revolution business. I'm used to it. But if there is anything I hate it's a Red Flagger. And I told Pascual Orozco so right in his damned face when he came in here one night with two of his women. Then I told him to vamoose."

She went down the stairs again and Lash, hurriedly dressing, heard the ringing of the telephone in her office. Then Jim Abernathy came in. His eyes took in signs of the fight, saw the long rip in the sheet where the knife had gone through. Lash saw the look.

"Buck didn't quite make it," he said grimly, and added a few details.

He finished dressing and went below, followed by the lawyer. La Gorda came out of her office.

"I got the railroad station, all right," she said. "Some Major of Cavalry is on duty in charge. But if they've got any kind of a head start, Minor will get through. He knows the password. Anyhow, maybe it doesn't matter now."

'It matters plenty, Estell," Lash said sharply.

"Not anymore, Ed Villa cut all telegraph communications north at midnight and stopped all trains. Pancho's done it again. The army is moving out."

"South again," Ed Lash said quietly. "Palacio Gomez. He couldn't go any place else because that's where the tracks lead for his trains. I've got a hunch there's going to be one hell of a big scrap."

"I suppose so," she sighed, and got up heavily, using a hand on the desk to support her great weight. "Well, I'd better start rousting out all those snoring generals before the place is filled with officers beating down the doors with gun butts. God, it's awful to feel that you're growing old and fat, Ed. For two cents I'd close up the joint and go with you. Me a soldadera. Oh my God, ha-ha!"

She went upstairs and began unlocking doors, her heavy bellows and curses ringing through the hotel. Lash turned to Abernathy. His hand went into his pocket, brought out his wallet, and from it he extracted a folded piece of paper. He handed it to a very uneasy lawyer.

"All right, Jim," he said, grinning a brittle grin. "That's my part of the deal. There's the order releasing your cattle back across the line. It won't take you more than a couple of weeks or so to ride northward—*if* you could get a horse."

CHAPTER XII

ABERNATHY turned abruptly and went back upstairs, his face now a mask of plain, murderous fury. He almost stomped along the porch back to his room to pack, shouldering past La Gorda, who was hauling a half dressed, sleepy General out through the doorway and shaking him. The hotel began to come alive and men started shouting at each other from room to room. They had been attacked. They were retreating. Huerta had been shot by Zapata. Zapata had been shot by Huerta. It was confusion but they were coming alive fast. Messengers began to arrive from Villa's little red caboose and they knew the truth. The army was going south. There was to be a great battle, and would those *colorados* learn a thing or two!

La Gorda came downstairs again and said, "Come on, Ed, let's go into the the kitchen and get some breakfast. You want a drink?"

He didn't want one. They went back and she disappeared through a door toward the quarters of the Chinese servants. Her bellows, which had been loud, now increased. Lash heard a squeal and saw her holding a Chinese by an ear.

"You stinking heathen!" she was

roaring. "When I tell you to roll out, I mean roll out in a hell of a hurry. Up! Get up, you lazy bunch of beggars. What do you think I pay you for?"

She came back with her great chest heaving and grinning in satisfaction. "One thing about the Chinese down here," she said. "You got to handle them firm. What do you want for breakfast?"

The servants came scurrying in and she led Lash over to a corner table. They sat down while the cooks got busy. "Where's your friend?" she said.

"Abernathy? I don't know, and care less," Lash said. "I got what he wanted from Villa and gave it to him, and that ends my part of the bargain."

"About the cattle. Gloria told me. If you had any sense you wouldn't let that friend of yours—pardon me, that man with you take her that way."

"That," he grinned at her, "is something we won't talk about, my fat one."

She looked at him out of those shrewd eyes. "I could tell you something," she said.

"Being a woman, you will," he said.

She laughed and then her face with its sagging jowls grew serious.

"Ed, I said you have to handle these Chinese right. I do. That means they keep nothing from me. I know everything that goes on in this hotel, and most of what goes on in the whole state of Chihauhau. Take the Stinson business a little while ago. You killed his brother in a gun fight, so I hear, and I thought I knew why. But something didn't fit. See that Chinese over there? He's one of the waiters. Last night after the ruckus was over that Chinese caught a glimpse of Stinson's face upstairs in General Minor's room. About that time the General sent word for this guy Abernathy to come up for a pow pow. He was up there about ten minutes. I know for a fact that Buck Stinson and General Minor were in conference with this Abernathy. A few hours later Stinson tried to knife you while you slept. Maybe he wanted to square up for his brother. That would be as good a reason as any. But you had something that Abernathy wanted. He's also got a girl who's in love with you."

"You're crazy," he cut in sharply.

"Like a fox," she admitted modestly. "I can put two and two together and it never come out five. It always comes out four. You take it from there and do your own figures. Just run the numbers up very carefully and see what it adds up to."

He ran them over in his mind while they ate fried eggs, fresh beef spiced with chili, fried potatoes, tortillas, and drank "coffee" made from chickery and roasted peanuts. It was strong, acid, and so black that milk wouldn't cut it.

"All right," he finally said. "I'll run the figures. And thanks."

He got up, kissed her goodbye on a fat cheek, and left. "Don't forget," she called after him. "If you ever need a good soldadera, let me know. I'm fat and short winded but I can cook on top of a box car with the best of them."

He told her all right and went upstairs to pack a few of his belongings. His powerful binoculars, pistol and cartridge belt, a clean shirt and some socks. That was all. You didn't carry baggage in the field. La Gorda could keep the bag and other things until he returned.

He didn't see Abernathy again that morning. He had other things on his mind as he went through the darkness toward the railroad yards. But the whole thing was quite clear now. The lawyer had got the order from Villa and then he must have had in mind all the time the idea of getting Lash out of

the way; possibly in anger over Lash's refusal to give up the order, possibly because it would save him two dollars a head, and quite possibly because of his jealousy over Gloria.

THE last named made Ed Lash's ugly, swarthy face break into a smile. He moved on toward the trains.

Bugles broke out at daylight, and the desert for miles around came swarming alive with men, catching, saddling, and mounting horses. Little groups rode here and there while in and out of them shot the running horses of mounted officers, bellowing instructions which were to be passed along. The officers always seemed to ride at a run. The early morning had been cold but now a hot sun was peeping up over the horizon, grim reminder of what was to come. All along the tops of the cars, festooned with a mass of women and children, smoke from the breakfast fires built on piles of sand billowed into a clear sky. Troopers loped by, shouting, joking, some heading for the water cars to fill their canteens. Others converged upon the ammunition cars.

"Pedro, you fool," called an officer's disgusted voice. "Go down and fill up your belts at once. You've wasted up all your ammunition shooting at the coyotes, you mule!"

"Yes, and I didn't hit any either, mi Capitan," came laughingly back.

Lash already had been to the ammunition car. The crossed belts over his chest weighed heavily with one hundred and fifty rounds of Mauser ammunition. The gun too, slung over his blanket, had belonged to a Federal.

Villa came by at a fast stride, tailed by a dozen reporters, among whom was Abernathy. He had gone on to their car and got himself fixed up with a bunk. Thus reporters were firing questions which Villa laughingly answered, and some he averted. They had been warned on pain of death about trying to send, by bribery, any messenger north after communications had been cut.

He caught sight of Lash and pulled up short.

Lash no longer looked like an American. He wore a better hat, bought from a Mexican soldier. With the crossed cartridge belts, blanket over his shoulder, slung rifle, and spurred boots, he looked like just another Mexican. He carried a saddle and bridle, secured from the supply car. Villa grinned.

"*Valgame Dios!* May God have mercy on me!" he exclaimed delightedly. "So I have a new cavalryman now?"

"Si, mi General."

"You should be with Captain Treston."

"No, mi General. I will go with Capitan Diaz for the time. And," he added, "I'll bet you a hundred dollars —gold, not Villa currency—that I beat you to the main place where we're going."

"You will bet me? I always go in at the head of my armies. And where are we going, you pelon?"

"You know damned well where we're going," Lash grinned back.

The reporters were eyeing the both of them, in particular this 'soldado.' One or two spoke fluent Spanish and were listening. Lash deliberately had spoken very rapidly to confuse them, even throwing in a few words of "pelado"—Villa's own mountain dialect, where he had spent so many years as an outlaw with a Government price on his head because he had committed the unforgivable sin—stealing cattle of the *ricos*.

Francisco Villa slapped his thigh and roared. "Done! A bet. Is it, is it?" (Lo es, lo es?) he demanded eagerly,

excitedly, like the child he could be over the small things.

"A bet," nodded Ed Lash.

The reporters had crowded around, those who could understand some Spanish straining their ears. "What's he saying? Who is he?" one questioned. "I didn't catch it all."

Villa grinned from his little sharp black eyes. He loved a joke. "He's saying that he's going to kill fifty Federals today. Who is he? Oh, just another of my peon machachos. They all brag like hell but they're good fighters."

That last one seemed to tickle him all the more. He went off into another roar of laughter, the perplexed reporters wondering what could be so funny about an ignorant peon soldier boasting to his chief. All except Jim Abernathy. He stood apart from the others, his eyes savagely baleful and just a little bit sneering.

Lash turned and went on. Villa had done the same. There was much work to be done. The reporters followed him, all except Abernathy. One of them was remarking to the others: "Can you beat this Villa guy? He's got nine thousand men here and he stops to talk to any of them. One was asleep on the floor of his caboose last night when he called us in to let us know there would be no more copy filed."

Lash made his way forward toward the head of the bunched trains. The Brigada Gonzales-Ortega had slipped out very quietly during the night aboard two trains. The Zargosa had followed a few hours later, a thousand mounted men—without their women this time—fading like ghosts into the vast wastes of the Chihuahua sands. They might be an advance guard. They might be swinging far to the east to join forces with old General Urbine and make a diverting attack.

One never knew what Villa had in mind. He listened to advice from his generals and then made his own decisions. And now the rest of the army was on the move.

LASH passed the horse and mule cars, now empty except for a few mounts under guard; probably fresh horses for the officers still dashing in and out among the trains and the groups of men further out on the dessert. He could have gotten one of the mounts, for Villa had signed the order. But there would be plenty of time. It was a long way south, and there wouldn't be too many Federals before Palacio Gomez.

He strode on in the midst of inextricable confusion. Soldiers with halters were running and cursing while they hunted for lost or stolen mounts. A man walked along shouting that he hadn't found his woman in three days to cook his meals, the she-dog probably having gone off with another man to cook *his* tortillas. He hungry.

"Never mind," laughed a woman from the top of a box car. "You will find another. Such a handsome man!"

She tossed him down two *tortillas,* which he began to munch hungrily. Two soldiers rode by. They were talking about General Minor. The General had disappeared during the night, along with several of his officers and a number of soldiers. The soldiers ducked aside as a General and his staff galloped past followed by hard riding orderlies. The two men looked after the officers and one began to hum the satirical song:

"I am Captain Oliveras,
Of the Spanish Artillery. . . ."

"HO, HO!" jeered his companion. "Just you wait until those pelones begin shooting at us with their cannon!

You'll turn tail and run like a frightened goat. But I'll bet you my rifle that I run faster than you do." . . ."

The repair train was getting ready to pull out first. Its first car was the flat car with the steel sheet bolted around the sides where was mounted Captain Diaz's grey El Niño with a canvas cover over the end of the long tube. The breech was open and piled back of it were stacks of gleaming shells, manufactured in the shops at Chihuahua after Villa took the city. Behind was an armored car filled with soldiers and their women, smoke from the cooking fires inside wisping out through the port holes. Third and fourth were two flat cars, one pilled high with steel rails, the other with ties. The next three were box cars jammed to suffocation with Chinese and Mexican laborers. Then came the engine, whose engineer and fireman also were belted with cartridges and had their rifles handy.

Captain Diaz was sputtering Spanish at his crew of two American gunners and five ammunition handlers. Lash swung the saddle up over the side and began climbing up. Diaz spun, his mustachios quivering.

"Get out!" he roared. "Go back and get a horse, you dog! Every damned soldier in the Army wants to ride with my El—Valgame Dios! Eduardo!"

He extended a fat hand and hauled. Lash went over the side and into another bear hug.

"Caramba!" said the little capitan. "So you come to ride with me. That is good. Come interpret for me, Eduardo. These damned Gringo's may be the best gunners in the world but they're as stupid as mules."

"Why?" asked Lash, grinning.

"Because," sputtered Diaz, "the fools can't speak Spanish!"

The artillerymen looked up, smoking boredly. "You speak American, Mac?" one of them asked. They were a little on the ragged side themselves; they also probably hadn't been paid in months.

"A little," Lash said. "Diaz wants something."

The man peered closer, then both jumped up. "My God! An American. Thought you were a Mex hunting a ride. They all think this is the safest place in the Army, right back of this gun. Just wait'll we take the lead when the rails start being torn up. One of these days while we're inching along we'll hit a dynamite mine and go sky high. They'll get back on the other cars quick enough. Why did I ever get in this war anyhow? For God's sake, have you got an American cigarette? What the hell does Diaz want?"

Diaz spluttered more Spanish. He waved his short arms and cursed. From somewhere behind c a m e a rustling sound and the little man spun like a pinwheel. A lovly Indian girl, not more than seventeen, came out from behind the ammunition crates.

"Get out of sight!" screamed the Captain. "Andale!"

"But it's cold back there and I've nobody to talk with," she pouted. "I thought you wanted to talk with me."

"Get back!" he yelled, shaking his fist. "I won't have these other men looking at you" He turned and grinned sheepishly in the face of loud laughter. Then he started firecracker Spanish again.

"He wants you to get the breech of that gun cleaned until it shines and then put a thin film of oil over the block," Lash translated. "He wants—"

"Say, bo," cut in the other artilleryman. "You tell him we know what's good for this gun and it ain't an oil bath. If he had his way we'd pour a five gallon can down the tube before each shot—and get ourselves blown sky high."

Lash grinned and Diaz swore more lurid oaths. The crew began to laugh again. Out to one side, among the stunted mesquites, a dozen soldiers were spurring madly and shooting at a rabbit. Yells floated back, gleeful yells of sheer exhiliration, and the flat car with its precious El Niño gave a warning jerk. It began to inch forward at a snail's pace while two men lay flat on their bellies out front and watched with hawk eyes the rails.

Not all men were loyal to Villa. He had, only the week before, executed three men caught slipping over to blow up a bridge and cut communications with Juarez.

The train inched on, the first out of the yard.

The army was under way, heading south toward Yermo and then on to Palacio Gomez.

CHAPTER XIII

THE main army inched into Yermo at a snail's pace without event. There it found the two trains carrying the Brigada Gonzales-Ortega on a siding with the engines puffing complacently. The first train on which Lash rode pulled up with several officers' cars in front of the station.

The station was in ruins, the top gone and great gaping holes showing in the walls. Orozco had, the year before, deliberately destroyed it with his cannon. Lash and Captain Diaz crawled stiffly down over the side. The latter paused long enough to point a levelled finger at his "wife" back of the ammunition crates.

"You keep out of sight," he ordered. "I will have no men looking at you."

They dropped down alongside the train and began striding back toward the station. To the west the dry, sandy plain, covered with grubby mesquite and dwarf cactus stretched away to distant mountains that were as dryly brown as they looked. To the east the plain simply disappeared in a flat land beyond the reach of human eyes. There was no water within forty miles. Only one battered water tank from whose deep alkali well it was hoped to fill the tank cars.

"Ah, those pelones," Captain Diaz said to Lash. "We heard that there was a big force of them here, but the cowards turned tail and ran when they saw the Gonzales-Ortega come in sight. But it makes no difference. We will catch them."

"You might," Lash said, "catch them a lot sooner than you think."

"Pah! That will be all the more misfortune for the fools. We will chase them like coyotes."

Inside the wrecked station a group of officers were crowded around a portable telegraph outfit. As Lash and Diaz came up loud roars of laughter came from within.

"I wonder what is up?" Diaz asked, and gave a tug at a mustachio. "Let's go find out."

The laughter came again, almost shaking the ruins.

"Listen!" cried out the operator's voice, and then he held up his hand for more silence. *"Oiga!* There is another message coming through."

It got quiet again except for the busy clicking of the key. They had accidently tapped a wire that the retreating Federals had failed to destroy. The wire connected with the military wire directly from General Velasco's headquarters in Torreon to Mapimi, not far from Palacio Gomez. Colonel Argumendo had left Palacio Gomez and taken command at Mapimi.

"Que dice?" a dozen voices demanded as the key ceased clicking.

The operator leaned back and

shrieked, his dark face contorted with laughter. "They say—they say," he choked out, "that up to the north there is some dust and smoke. He thinks it might be a few rebels patrolling south from Escalon!"

More howls broke out. Diaz began to dance around like an Indian, shouting, "The fools! Oh, those stupid pelones! They had their spies right in Chihuahua and still Villa outwitted them. *Que lástima!* What a pity!"

Presently the officers began filing from the ruins of the station, all talking rapidly. One of the Generals in charge began issuing orders for the disposition of the trains. They were to spend the night at Yermo.

It was a hard job to position the trains for all ten of them were long and the yards not too big. By the time the job was done late evening had come down.

Villa had not come with the trains. He had ridden into the desert from Chihuahua. Lash had seen neither Gloria nor Abernathy. But as he crossed the yard to fill his canteen at the water cars he passed the nurses' cars. The door of one of them slid back and he saw Gloria. He pulled the blanket up to his eyes, for a cold wind had begun to rise, sweeping little swirls of dust along the tracks beneath the iron wheels of the hundreds of cars.

"Lash," she called, gently.

He stopped and then went over to her as she climbed down to the ground. He saw that her eyes were worried. She looked pale and drawn.

"If it's Abernathy you want, I haven't seen him," he said shortly. "You can send word over to the reporters' cars. They're in there drinking whiskey."

"It's not Jim, Lash," she said: and then she hesitated as though not knowing just how to go on.

"I never liked people who beat around the bush, Gloria," he said in his hard, blunt way. "Whatever it is, say it."

"All right. Will—will you send Maria to me? Tell her it's all right. She doesn't have to stay away from me now that—"

He gripped her hard by the shoulders, taking a long step forward. His swarthy face had a brutal, ugly look on it.

"Where is she?" he demanded. "You mean you think she'd become a soldareda for me?"

"She's in love with you," Gloria said. "I know she was, though she never admitted it. And when you two left together last night and she didn't return I thought you had perhaps married her. I—Lash, she's not with you?"

HE LEFT her go and stepped back. "I left her a few minutes after we came from the hotel. She said she wanted to walk alone. I haven't seen her since."

"She didn't come back to the car last night, Lash. I—I didn't know. I knew she loved you and since she's never been late before I presumed that you might have gotten married in these last few days."

"I asked her to and she refused," he said harshly.

"But what could have happened to her?" she cried out. "If she was with the trains she'd have been here. Lash, I'm frightened. Do you suppose that Buck Stinson actually would have taken her?"

He thought swiftly. He had left Maria early in the evening. Stinson had made his attack in the room six or seven hours later. It hardly seemed possible that the girl would have been walking the streets alone until that late hour, and then picked up by Stinson as he

fled after the attack. He stilled the uneasiness in him. He said, "There's about fifteen thousand people in this outfit and she might have got mixed up on the wrong train. Then, too, Villa has his hospital rigged up to take care of the wounded he brought in and those who got hit out on patrols. She could have gone there to work on an emergency case and remained all night. Maybe she was ordered to stay there."

"I hope so," Gloria Holden almost whispered. "Will you try to get a wire through to Chihuahua and find out?"

He shook his head. "Sorry, but that's out," he said a little less roughly. "The man who sent that message would be shot within fifteen minutes. Too many leaks. They've already tapped a wire the Federals have left uncut. Sorry."

He strode off and left her there and went on to the water car. Night began to fall as it does so swiftly in the desert; and the sandy, greasewood studded plain became a million stars on the horizon as the last of the light began to fade and the supper fires were lit. The wind grew sharper. It turned colder and the gusts increased. Sparks shot off the tops of box cars and children, many with only a rag for clothing, began to cry. The women hunkered down over their cooking pots and scolded. From somewhere in the distance, over by the water tower, came the *chug-chug* of the engine pumping water into the tank, while it went out just as fast as a locomotive spotted one car after another before the rusty spout.

Laughter flated to Lash's ears as he walked along the train toward Villa's caboose. The laughter of a people who never stopped, even in the face of cold, of hunger, of poverty—even death. All of a sudden Ed Lash knew what always seemed to draw him back to Mexico. It was their laughter.

He listened to the blowing of bugles, the yells, shouts, an occasional shot in the night, and watched the gusts increase. That might mean rain. He had had supper with Diaz, cooked by the Indian girl, the three of them hunkering down over the tiny fire in back of the ammunition crates. The crew had gone off to their women, the gunners to forage for food. The three squatted like Indians, blankets tight around their shoulders and ate *tortillas,* meat, beans, and finished it off with two bottles of Monople Champagne that only God and Captain Diaz knew the source.

From over in the reporters' car—a specially equipped box car with bunks, stove, and tables—came laughter a little too loud. Someone of them was bedevilling their Chinese cook.

Villa rode in about the time Lash reached the end of the car and came to the caboose. Nothing special had brought him. Lash was merely restless, and terribly worried about Maria. General Minor had left with a number of officers and men and, presumably, Buck Stinson. It would not be the kind of a ride for a woman. She couldn't stand it at the pace they would be fleeing, in fear of pursuit from Villa soldiers.

LASH put aside his uneasiness over the disappearance of the girl as Francisco Villa rode up and swung down. *El General* had stopped off at Camargo to attend a *baile* given by an old friend. He handed the reins of his bay stallion to a soldier, his face drawn with lines of fatigue. He had ridden all day Saturday from Chihuahua, danced all Saturday night until Sunday, and ridden still another day. Twelve hours in the saddle, twelve more at a *baile,* and another twelve in the saddle.

"What a dance!" he grinned up at Doctor Raschbaum, who stood on the rear platform of the caboose, looking

down at the dusty, tired face. This was not good. There was some tough fighting ahead and a man must have plenty of rest. "What girls! They are the most beautiful in Mexico. It was harder work than a dozen battles. Oh, Eduardo! Come on up, you damned peon. Let's eat."

Lash shook his head. "Another time. Here come the reporters."

"They want to interview Francisco Villa about a dance. Carrai, but you Americans are a strange people."

Word had flashed around that he was back. It always did, an electrical current spreading through an army with all the speed of a military wire. Men were jumping—and staggering—out of the reporters' car. Two came trotting with flashlight cameras.

Villa went inside but a General dashed up on a horse and pushed his way through the crowd right up to the platform, making a rapid report in Spanish. Lash saw General Angeles, Carranza's Secretary of War, a tired looking, bony faced man, inside. *El General* nodded, and all the while yanked off his coat. He came back, listened to the report, shot back orders without hesitation and went inside again to strip off his shirt. Soldiers, blankets drawn to the eyes, were converging on the car.

More Generals dashed up, shouting. They never seemed to talk in anything but a shout. The reporters were bunched at the rear platform, shivering, waiting. When Villa came out again he was in his undershirt, a towel in one hand. He wiped at the suds covering one ear.

General Caldazo, manager of the railroad, was told in what order the trains would pull out. General Uro, in charge of all supplies, broke in. He was told what and how much to distribute among the troops, their women already a clamoring mass before the long line of commissary cars. Señor Muñoz, head of the telegraph lines, shot in with a report of the tapped Federal wire.

Villa looked at him. Without hesitation he barked out the name of a man. The man was a Federal Captain, surrounded and killed with his men a few days before by hard bitten, hard riding old General Urbina, far to the east. None of the Federal patrol had escaped.

"Get a message to General Velasco in Torreon," Villa directed Señor Muñez. "Ask for orders and sign that dead Captain's name."

A flashlight boomed. Villa, unmindful of it and the cold, began answering questions from the reporters, shouting because by now, close by where Ed Lash was standing, some soldiers had produced a guitar and were singing for him. Lash saw Abernathy, too. His eyes were on Lash's face. He grinned at the lawyer and pulled his blanket back up to his eyes again to shut out the cold.

Villa talked, his eyes on the reporters while he listened to the words. Fussy Doctor Raschbaum finally came hurriedly from within and threw a coat over his shoulders, muttering imprecations with a shake of his head.

"Louder!" yelled *El General* to the singers.

They leaned back and sang louder, amid the steadily increasing tempo of the wind.

"Here is General Francisco Villa,
With his chiefs and his officers,
Who come to saddle the short horns.
Of the Federal army.

"Get ready now, colorados,
Who have been talking so loud.
For Villa and his soldiers,
Will soon take off your hides!

"Today has come your tamer,
The father of Rooster Tamers,
To run you out of Torreon—
To the devil with your skins!

"The rich with all their money,
Have already got their lashing,
As the soldiers of Urbina can tell,
And those of Maclovio Herrera.

"Fly, fly away little dove,
Fly over all the prairies,
And say that Villa has come,
To drive them out forever.

"Ambition will ruin itself,
And Justice will be the winner,
For Villa will reach Torreon,
To punish the avaracious.

"Fly away, Royal Eagle,
These laurels carry to Villa,
For he has come to conquer,
Bravo and all his Colonels.

"Now you sons of the Mosquito,
Your pride will come to an end,
If Villa has come to Torreon,
It is because he could do it!

"Viva Villa and his soldiers!
Viva Herrera and his gente!
You have seen, wicked people,
What a brave man can do.

"With this we now say goodbye;
By the Rose of the Castile,
Here is the end of our rhyme,
To the great General Villa!"

THE thing had lasted several minutes. It was the first time Lash had heard the song. He had been listening closely and knew that some of the singers hadn't heard it before either. They had gone off into rhymes of their own, switched over, and followed the others. The next time the words would probably be a little different; the men improvised as they went along. Such was the manner in which hundreds of really beautiful revolutionary songs had been born. The Generals sat in a semi-circle on their horses, watching Villa who watched the singers. Now their horses began to cavort restlessly, the men impatient to get on with more business. A reporter asked Villa what he was thinking of while his soldiers sang. His reply was typical of the man.

"That—that song is the best damn song in the whole world," chuckled Francisco Villa.

Lash straightened and threw away his cigarette amid the laughter and began making his way back along the train through the wind to the flat car where El Niño's elevated snout tilted sullenly into the night sky. Footsteps crunched behind and Abernathy's voice said, "Wait a minute, Lash. I'd like to speak with you."

CHAPTER XIV

LASH waited until he came up and then said in his blunt way, "I don't want to talk to you."

"I know you don't," Abernathy replied.

"I don't want to see you again until I walk into your office to collect on the few head you might have left by the time Villa takes Torreon and opens up the lines again."

They were walking along the train, stepping around fires where muffled figures sat huddled for warmth. The yard with its massed trains was beginning to quiet down a bit, for these people slept when they could. It might be an hour or day, but when the order came they would be on the move again. One slept and rested when one had the opportunity.

"How long do you think that might

be?" asked the lawyer.

Lash shrugged and the shrug was that of a Mexican. "Quien sabe?" he replied. "Presuming that General Minor and his men and Buck Stinson got through, the Federals in Palacio Gomez now know about how strong Villa is. Velasco will, if he's not too over confident of his armies at Gomez and Mapimi, send up more troop trains and cannon from Torreon. This scrap coming up isn't going to be any skirmish. It's going to be big time and a lot of men are going to get killed."

"Then there'll be no way for me to get back north again until it's over?"

Again the shrug. "Villa has his main hospitals at Chihuahua City and Juarez. If enough men are wounded that they can't be taken care of in Chihuahua, then he'll send hospital trains on north. You could ride up."

"I'm glad you told me. I was worried."

"Of course," sneered Lash. "It's costing you thrity or forty head of cattle a day. I know. You know, I never thought of it, but it's costing me from sixty to eighty dollars a day to stay in this army. I'll remind Pancho of that. I'll tell him I'm losing money because he's eating up cows that I have a bonus coming from. Provided, of course, that I get back alive."

Abernathy didn't answer for a moment. "Don't you expect to?" he finally asked.

Ed Lash laughed softly into the biting wind. "I'm not any too sure. Not with you and Buck Stinson running loose."

"I? What in Gd's name have I got to do with it, Ed? You don't think that I would—"

"You'll have to now, Jim," Lash cut in. "Buck failed miserably. Minor has deserted and can't get me shot behind Villa's back. So that leaves you. I don't know whether it was on account of Gloria or whether you wanted to save the bonus on those cattle that you had the pow wow with Buck up in the General's room last night. How much did you pay him?"

Abernathy's breath came in with a sharp sound that told of a man badly startled and a little shaken. Lash looked at him and laughed again, sneeringly. "You didn't think you could get away with it in La Gorda's hotel, did you? You should have known that she knows everything that goes on. No, don't start to protest. Just tell me something: are you going to try and finish the job?"

"Yes," came the reply. "I've got to."

"Down here?"

"I don't know. You could tell Villa who I am and maybe get me shot; but strange as it may seem, I'm not afraid of that. I know you too well. You don't do business that way. So if I get the chance I'll do it here. If I don't, I wouldn't, if I were you, ever come back to Puerto Prieta,, Ed."

"I'll be back, if I don't get one when the cavalry goes in. I like that town. I'm beginning to think I've made a mistake about Gloria, too. Up there she was one kind of a woman. Down here, finding a little freedom before she has to settle down on the ranch again, she's another kind of woman. My kind."

"I see," the lawyer said softly. And then, quite frankly: "I've always been afraid that would happen. If it hadn't been for you, she and I might have been married quite awhile ago. So it's got to be one of us. You understand that?"

"I have from the time I saw her in the hotel. I knew it and I even fought against it by asking little Maria to marry me. But she was a woman and she knew. You'd better get back to the reporters' car—unless you want to

go over and see her."

ABERNATHY turned abruptly on his heel and disappeared into the night and Lash returned to the flat car. He climbed in. From back of the ammunition crates Diaz slept soundly in the arms of his young Indian wife, the two of them wrapped in their blankets. The shell handlers were off with their women and the gunners, too. Lash went to the opposite end and laid down, drawing the heavy blanket about him. The wind was howling a bit and it was cold, but he was innured to it.

Sleep, however, would not come. He was trying to analyze his feelings, wondering if he had been in love with Gloria Holden all along and had either not known it or subconsciously had fought against it because she was the daughter of a very rich man and he was not rich. He didn't know, but he would tell her.

And perhaps she would laugh in his face.

He lay there for a long time and finally began to doze off. But of a sudden there came the sound of running feet breaking into the whistle of the wind and he heard his name called.

He got up and went to the steel side, peering over into the darkness. Two soldiers stood looking up.

"Señor Lash?"

"Si."

"Ah. They said you are in the car of Capitan Diaz' El Niño. Come quick. You are wanted."

Lash dropped his blanket and went over the side to the ground. There was urgency in the man's voice. "What is it?" he asked.

"You are to go to the car of the nurses very fast. You are wanted there. Most urgent."

Lash thanked the man and set off. He climbed over the tops of two trains, past the sleeping figures of a hundred men, women, and children wrapped up close for warmth, and presently saw the lights of the car. Around it was a ring of silent horsemen in high crowned sombreros. He strode through and an officer said sharply, "Señor Lash. Ah, you have come. You are to go in the car at once."

Lash saw then, in the light from the car, that the officer's uniform was covered with blood. Somebody else's blood. He swung up and went inside, feeling awkward and out of place.

A dozen nurses were grouped around, talking in whispers and looking frightened. From the other end of the car came a man's gruff voice, that of a doctor. Then Lash saw Gloria. She was crying. She beckoned and came down the narrow aisle between the partitioned off cubbyholes. She almost ran into his arms.

"Lash, oh Lash!" she cried out. "It's Maria."

He followed her back. A bearded man in white looked up. "If you're Lash, this girl wants to talk with you."

Lash bent down over the figure in the bunk. They had a sheet pulled up over her but underneath it he could see the bandages. Protruding from beneath the sheet's edge was part of her dress, the same dress he had worn last night, and it was torn and dirty and stained with blood.

"Only a few words," warned the doctor. "She's been shot twice."

He bent down and Maria's eyes opened and looked up at him. She managed to lift a small hand to his. "Eduardo," she murmured weakly. "I'm so . . . glad you come."

"What is it, querida?" he asked. "What happened?"

"Last night, when I walked. Men grab me. Soldiers. I scream and fight and people laugh. They take me out in

the desert and wait. Hours. Then Buck Stinson come with General Minor and we ride south. They say—they say all telegraph is stopped. Villa going to Gomez. We ride hard. Then Señor Buck Stinson he shoot me because I am tired. He leave me to die. He say—he say, 'If any damned rebels find you before you kick—off, tell Ed Lash I meet him . . . in Palacio Gomez. He say—"

She couldn't finish it. The doctor shook his head and stepped forward with a hypo needle, which he inserted into her bared arm. "That's all," he said crisply to Lash. "She shouldn't have talked, but there was no hope. She lost too much blood."

Lash looked at her and started to turn, but her eyes had opened again. Some kind of a smile lit up her face and some kind of inherent strength brought her hand up once more. "Eduardo," she murmured softly.

It was the last word she spoke.

LASH turned away, his ugly face a mask to fight down his emotions. His face on the surface was the same; bitter, brutal, ugly. Inside he felt some kind of hot fire raging, mingled with something that choked him up inside. She had loved him but she had stepped aside because of another girl who now stood openly crying.

Lash said gruffily, "I saw Abernathy tonight. He's going back north on the first hospital train. You'd better go with him. Nothing to keep you here now."

"There's . . . plenty to keep me here," she said. "I'll stay."

He got into the night somehow, and for once the chill wind didn't cut into his body. For some strange reason the bet he made with Villa came to mind.

He knew now that he was going to win that bet, and he knew how. He was going to beat the chief into Palacio Gomez ahead of the armies and find Buck Stinson.

He slept little that night, dozing off fitfully sometime in the early morning hours. Buck Stinson, "Fuentes the Butcher" was now safe back among his own kind.

He would have to be patient.

It sprinkled a bit during the night and after a time the wind died down. At daylight Lash awoke to the sound of bugles on the plain. He roused himself, stiff from the cold. He heard sounds of horses moving and looked over the edge of the steel shield. To his astonishment he saw a sea of horses with riders aboard.

The cavalry was moving out.

In the gray dawn a hundred red-white-green flags fluttered among the groups. To the opposite side the artillery had been unloaded from flat cars and parked in a circle to make a corral for the mules, which always pulled the guns. More dust was funnelling up from within the enclosure as the drivers, swearing, smarted under the jeers of the lounging gunners and fought to put on harness.

Captain Diaz woke up, and it was obvious that from the moment his lids parted he was in a very bad mood. He began to swear and reached for the last bottle of the Monople Champagne. He roared at the Indian girl until she got the fire started back on the ammunition crates.

"Que paso, amigo?" Lash asked.

"What happened?" yelled Diaz sputteringly. "I am the commander of the Niños, am I not?"

"Yes."

"No I'm not, damn you!" yelled the little man. "Last night I get my orders. Some Colonel is to take over the cannon. All of them. I am to stay with this very car and this lone gun for a

very special purpose. The tracks ahead are torn up and some bridges burned. So I must stay here and watch for any Rurales or colorados. When the battle begins, where will I be?"

"Right here with this gun watching for patrols of Rurales or colorados to attack the workmen," Lash said.

"That's what I said to *you!*" bawled the little man and finally had to break off the neck of the bottle.

The Indian girl had some tortillas, cold meat, and a few beans. They breakfasted and Captain Diaz drank the rest of the champagne. That put him in fine fettle. He began to swear harder than ever.

Lash adjusted blanket and rifle over his shoulder and picked up his saddle and bridle. Diaz let out another bawl, this one of pure dismay.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"With the cavalry. I'm not an artilleryman. I can't pack rails either."

"No, no, Eduardo! You stay here and interpret for me."

"I'm going to the horse corral to get a good mount and ride on," was the reply. "If I don't hurry, I'll get none. What do you want me to do—follow along with a burro?"

"You cannot go. I command you. I am your superior officer!" sputtered Diaz.

Lash grinned and clapped him affectionately on the shoulder and then dumped his gear over the side. He followed with Diaz roaring oaths, commands, supplications. About then the two gunners and crew showed up and the little man with the mustachios swung his curses toward them.

"D o g s! Cowards!" he shouted down, brandishing a fist. "Where have you been?"

"Tell him," drawled one of the Americans, puffing complacently on a cigarette, "that there are some things you just don't ask a man right after breakfast."

CHAPTER XV

LASH carried his gear a quarter of a mile over to the horse corral and dumped the saddle on the ground. The corral had been rigged up with ropes staves and abandoned barbed wire. Several men were inside, catching their mounts. Lash showed the order from Villa to the soldier in charge and borrowed a rope.

He came out leading a shiny black that probably had seen better days in a huge stable of one of the various Terrazzas families. The soldier promptly set up violent protestations.

"No, no, señor!" he protested. "Any horse but that. That grey over there. He is the finest one of the herd. A grand charger. Fierce as a bear in battle. I know—I have ridden him myself. This black is no good. He will run off and leave you when you dismount. He has the heaves—and besides, that is Captain Odneta's favorite mount."

Lash reached into his pocket and brought out the sheaf of Villa money. He peeled off a bill and the man broke off his protestations to bare teeth covered with green slime in a wide grin.

"Ah," he said. "You are a Colonel of Artillery. You have ordered me to give over this mount. I have protested but in vain. You have threatened to have me shot. So what can a poor peon soldier do? I have a soldadera and three children to fight for. Ah, por Dios, but I have protested in vain."

After which, that over with, he helped Lash saddle up.

Lash swung up and loped out onto the plain, milling among a thousand horsemen. Bugles had begun to blow

again and in the yards behind him the ten locomotives were signalling to each other. There came a final blast, and then the engineer of the repair train released the whistle cord, edged open the throttle, and El Niño's elevated snout began to push through the air above the two thin lines of steel. Lash thought of Diaz and grinned. He could imagine the little man sputtering curses at gunners who couldn't, or wouldn't, understand.

Diaz lived to fight, his greatest moment when he stood back of a half dozen of the Niños lined up a few yards apart and directed the hurling of shells at distant enemy positions.

Then the picture of Maria came to mind and Ed Lash turned his thoughts to last night. On a hunch he swung the black over and loped towards the yards again. He moved toward the nearest spot where the nurses' car had stood; and it was there, just outside the yards on the edge of the desert, that he found what he was looking for.

Somebody had erected a cross at the head of the fresh mound and on it in crude letters had been painted in black: *Maria Elena Charon. Died in the Revolution.*

He took off his hat for a moment, and his thoughts ran back to the night when she had said—what was it? Now he remembered. "I am a pawn in the Revolution."

First her parents, at the hands of Orozco's men. Next her brothers, in battle. She had followed, as though some grim fate had decreed that it was to be that way.

Died in the Revolution, Lash thought bitterly.

Killed by an American renegade.

Lash put on his hat and slowly rode away. Once he looked back at the fresh mound of dirt. The gentle breeze blowing already was at work on its levelling job. A few months, a few years, and only a level stretch of sand would mark the resting place of little Maria Elena Chacon.

"Es vida," the Mexicans said. It is life.

The trains moved out, ten of them in a long line, creeping slowly; following the cautious repair train. On either side, four abreast, rode columns getting longer and longer as men fell in and took their places. No trained cavalrymen, these. They knew nothing and cared less about parade ground maneuvers. They knew only to ride by fours and then, when the bugle sounded a charge, to spread out abreast and thin themselves out to make less targets for the Federal cannon.

And when their horses were shot from under them, or stolen, they simply went to the trains and rode with their women and children as infantrymen until another horse could be found—or stolen. Horseback or afoot, they moved in the same precise manner.

No le hace. It makes no difference.

THE dusty columns, sprinkled through with Mexican flags, grew to almost three miles in length. Between the two columns crept the trains, the ten long ones, festooned by thousands of *soldaderas,* their offspring, many of which had been born on those trains, and the men they followed without complaint. The wind died down as the sun grew hotter; the dust grew. Presently the trains halted and a few soldiers dashed over, and then came loping back into place. Word went down the line.

They had found a mine.

They halted again at a small, burned out bridge. The rails had been cut and a big chain hooked around the loose ends. The other end of the chains had been fastened to a locomotive. It had

backed up, hauling at the rails, and now they curved high in the air like shavings from one of Villa's lathes in the big shops in Chihuahua City.

While the long columns of horsemen on either side of the train waited, Chinese and Mexican laborers swarmed from the work cars. Men became busy ants—a stream of them carrying ties and rails. Thirty Chinese hauled a rail from the flat car, slid it onto their shoulders, and trotted off toward the place where ties were being crossed to build up the bridge to road level. Officers galloped back and forth always with the never ending shouts of *"Andale! Andale!"* It was *walk it fast, hurry, hurry.* The trains must be on the move. The endless shouts mingled with the clank of hammers on railroad spikes. Then the job was done, the men carried their tools back to the cars, they climbed in, drenched with sweat, and the cartridge-belted engineer whistled off in answer to the signal from Captain Diaz.

The trains began to move across the repaired bridge and the long motionless column of waiting horsemen on either side of the tracks writed into motion in unison. Ten trains. Six thousand horsemen. Three thousand infantrymen on the cars. Countless thousands of women and children. And back to the rear, Lash thought, the dirt began to settle where a fresh mound had been left behind, alone, to keep vigil with the cannon shattered station and the battered water tank.

Some of the cavalry was now far to the front; and Pancho Villa, astride his bay stallion, had disappeared. But the Zaragosa had returned from somewhere.

They had left Chihuahua on Saturday. They had reached Yermo on Sunday night. This was Monday, and Palacio Gomez was getting closer. You could feel it everywhere, the tense air of expectancy increasing with each mile. The Federals, both regulars and the Red Flaggers, ought to be there. It was a good place for a fight, and it was the gateway to Torreon, richest city on the middle of Mexico. The *Federales* would be there; they knew it. They had to be there. And what a whipping they would get! They would be bowled over like frightened goats. They would be chased into the hills and killed as they ran for their lives. Don Pancho could do it. Don Pancho was the greatest General in the whole world. The Inspirer of Courage, the Hope of the Indians, the Idol of the Poor.

Don Pancho could do it!

They passed through Conejos that day—another Yermo. Orozco's cannon again had done its work well. It was burned out, shot out, looted, in ruins. A few forlorn *parificos*—the peaceful ones—stood watching stolidly, their pitifully few belongings packed and their goats tied up close for quick flight in case there should be fighting or looting.

Conejos fell behind and another night came. Monday night. Lash twisted his tired body in the saddle, unstrapped his canteen, took a drink, and handed the canteen to a ragged boy of fourteen who rode at his right knee. The dust was choking. They hadn't eaten since morning.

At another burned out bridge, fires were lit and supper prepared. The horses were parched with thirst but there was no water. The precious supply in the tank cars must be saved for the men and women. Lash tied the tired black at the end of a borrowed rope to let it grab a few mouthfuls of the sparse vegetation and worked through the milling throng. He thought of going to Diaz's flat car for something to eat, but it was two miles away. There was no time. He worked his way

through the milling throng, blanket and rifle over his shoulder; dust covered, dirty, sweaty, his spurs clanking. And it had to be some kind of a fate that brought him past the nurses' cars, and that Gloria stood on the ground. She was talking with Abernathy, who had come over from the reporters' car; but he could have sworn that her eyes were looking past him, scanning each face of the shuffling men who came by, hunting for their women.

"LASH!" she cried out. "Lash, I was hoping for some kind of a miracle that would bring you by."

He stopped for a moment, ignoring Abernathy. The lawyer was clean shaven and smoking complacently.

"Why?" Ed Lash asked.

"I—" she colored and then went on hurriedly. "I thought you might be hungry. I know you are. I think I can find something for you to eat."

"Thanks," he said. "About a hundred other men around might get the same idea."

"How are you?" Abernathy asked.

"Worrying about the money I'm losing on your cattle," Lash said with irony. "But you won't lose much more, I think."

"Why?"

"Palacio Gomez isn't far ahead. If rumors are right, there ought to be a hospital train or two going north pretty soon now." And to Gloria: "I saw the grave this morning. I went over to look for it."

"You were in love with her," Abernathy cut in coolly. "Sure, you went over to look for her."

"Maybe," Ed Lash replied, "I was. Maybe with her, maybe because she was a symbol of Mexico. I don't know. I don't know. I guess I'll never know. Who buried her, Gloria?"

"The nurses," she said softly. "We got some men to dig the grave and then sent them away. Ed, you should have seen the look of peace on her face. It was seeing you just before she died, I think. Yes, I know she loved you. But she turned you down because she thought you were in love with her."

"I am," he said harshly, and strode on into the night.

He didn't know why he had said it; and for some strange reason he couldn't understand, he suddenly cursed himself for a fool.

CHAPTER XVI

HE MOVED on, tired but filled with a strange restlessness, and presently he came upon a fire around which squatted two old crones and two younger women, one heavy with child. They looked up and Lash saw the invitation in their plain faces.

"Aha," one of the crones said. "A soldier who can't find his woman to feed him his supper. These two young women have been waiting for their lost men who have not come. Sit with us, Señor, and share of our humble food."

He said, "Gracias," and squatted down by the fire's welcoming warmth, pulling out a pack of cigarettes. Their eyes lit up at sight of the pack. They were smoking the crude *macuche,* rolled in corn husks. Lash extended the pack and exclamations of joy rose in chorus.

This was an unheard of luxury. *Americano cigarros.*

"Mother of God!" exclaimed one of the crones, throwing away her corn husk. "It was the Blessed Virgin herself who sent this good man to us this night. It is a miracle."

He gave them the rest of the pack, over their protestations, and then ate hungrily of the meat and beans and tortillas. He rose, stretched with a full stomach, and brought out the sheaf of

Villa money. They stared at him.

"It is not for the supper," he explained in the face of a chorus of "No, no, no's". A little something to buy some sweets when you get to Torreon."

He left them almost weeping with gratitude and went to one of the tank cars, where he filled his half gallon saddle canteen. He went back to the black, poured half the water into his hat, and let it get down a couple of good swallows. Afterward he lay beneath a mesquite and smoked. Presently he grew restless, swung into the saddle, and rode southward toward the head of the column. Bermejillo, garrisoned by Rurales, had been passed that afternoon, the head of the column engaging the retreating force in a fifteen mile running fight. A number had been killed,* their bodies, stripped of clothing and valuables, left where they had fallen.

The buzzards and coyotes—*los zopilotes y los coyotes*—would take care of what had been left by the victors. Lash rode on, reached the head of the column, and quite unexpectedly ran into Villa. He had come up to look over the situation. Nobody knew where he had been during the day; nobody asked or seemed interested.

He sat among a ring of dark horsemen, an old muffler around his neck. He still wore the small hat and the soiled brown suit.

"Oyez!" he called out, ranging his horse over. *"Que paso?* What happens?"

"Nada," Lash replied. Nothing.

This was old stuff, this riding at night. There had been plenty of it the first time until General Minor's hatred had forced him to leave to avoid trouble. Strange, Lash thought, but he hadn't thought of either Minor or Buck Stinson in hours. He looked ahead into the night and Villa sensed the thought.

(* Author's note: 115 to be exact)

"Still going to win that bet?" chuckled *El General.*

"Yes," answered Lash simply; and then he quietly told him why. Villa listened with darkened face as the story of Minor, of Buck Stinson, and the murder of little Maria was unfolded.

"So I've got to go in first," Ed Lash finished. "I think you're going to take Gomez."

"We'll take it, all right," was the reply.

"But you won't take it until after one hell of a fight. But you'll take it. And when we go in the birds will have flown. That's why I'm going in ahead of you."

"You are a fool, Eduardo," Francisco Villa replied. "You would not live five minutes if you were recognized. Argumendo would stand you against a wall and then shoot you an inch at a time through the hands and arms. I know that butchering cabrone."

"I'm goinng in," Lash said.

"It will be a hard fight. I just got a message from Urbina. He's taken Mapimi. Those eight hundred colorados under Argumendo turned their tails and hit for Gomez without firing one shot. I was hoping we could kill a few there."

"They won't be there—those two—when things get hot," Lash grunted.

"So you're going ahead with this crazy Gringo idea of yours?"

"I know where Fuentes is. I'm going after him. He said he'd meet me there. He will."

"I don't care about you getting killed," Villa chuckled. "But I hate to lose such a good horse."

Morning again. Another hot day. It was Tuesday.

IT WAS to be the terrrible Tuesday of Palacio Gomez that men would talk about for a long time. The trains had

halted during the night and water had been found for the horses. Water and feed.

For they were now but fifteen miles away and the desert was gone. It had given way to green fields, some blooming white with cotton planted by men who now carried guns or whose bones lay bleaching all over Northern Mexico. There were corn and maise, neglected where it stood until the armies had, that morning, broken down the fences and let their horses feed until they bloated. Alamo trees threw green shade over the irrigation ditches, and from a burned out cotton gin a lone goat tempted fate and a meat pot by emitting foolish bleats. Watching as they moved by.

Villa and his staff were now out in front, even the tired looking General Angeles, Carranza's Secretary of War, to the fore. A war map of Mexico was slung in a case at his left shoulder.

Villa usually had little time for his American soldiers. They were mere *soldados* and nothing more; down in the Revolution for excitement, adventure, and some had come with high hopes of much loot. But Ed Lash had been his friend in El Paso in bygone days—and there was still the matter of a bet *El General* thought he was going to win. It was a fair bet. The odds must be fair too. An even chance.

That was why Ed Lash rode with them on that fateful Tuesday.

The repair train was no longer to the fore. At a siding one of them had been broken up. The cannon cars were now in front with the mule cars directly behind, and Lash could imagine the feelings of Captain Diaz. The little man would almost be foaming at the mouth, dancing around and yelling and maybe beating his young Indian "wife" to let off steam.

But Villa knew General Velasco in Torreon and he knew his Federals. Their cannon were good stuff from Europe and so were their shells. His cannon were good too but his shells were homemade with a far greater percentage of duds. Nonetheless, the cannon now were to the fore. And if they wanted to make a long range duel of it, he was ready. He would give them back shell for shell.

He threw up his hand and thirty men pulled up to a halt. Villa unslung his glass. So did several of the Generals. Lash's own powerful binoculars hung from a strap around his neck.

They were now fifteen miles from Palacio Gomez.

"I don't understand it, mi General," one of the party said to Villa. "We are within a few miles of the place and they have come out to meet us."

"They are waiting for us to come in," Villa said, eyes glued to his glasses.

He was standing high in the bull nose *tapideras* covering his stirrups, stiff legged and straight, looking taller than his short height. The brown suit was gone. He wore a brown hat with a very wide brim and a low, round crown fitting close against his skull, a dirty brown wool shirt, and a pair of leather pants with fringes that looked almost like buckskin leggins. A rifle was slung over one shoulder.

They had handed him his sword when he left the caboose; and he had snapped back, "This is a fight, not a parade. Give me my rifle."

He was still high in the stirrups, sweeping the town. General Angeles shifted the war map case and said, "It looks bad."

Villa made no answer. In his caboose he conferred with a dozen generals at a time, packed in like sardines, and he listened to their advice, nodding his head and saying, *"Si. Si."* Then he made his own decisions with snap judgment. And those decisions were obeyed

without question. He was Carranza's Chief of all Generals.

He made one now.

"We're going in," he announced.

Somebody started to demure, knowing of those entrenched cannon over there, for their positions could be made out, even at fifteen miles. But the action already had started.

FRANCISCO VILLA raised one hand and brought it down through the air, in the direction of a nearby bugler who sat his horse, waiting. The bugler blew a call, a signal to the other buglers. They took it up and it rolled out across the irrigation ditches greening the land for miles ahead. It reverberated back along the two long lines of horsemen strung out on either side of the trains.

What happened after that was nothing short of magical.

The column on the right side of the trains immediately made a sharp turn to the right and began to gallop single file to the west. The column on the left side of the trains did an abrupt turn to the left and began galloping east, again stringing out in single file. Trains began to give off their bellowing signals of battle, sending plumes of steam that faded into the air. Faint cheers came from the soldiers and their women and children on the cars.

Within forty minutes six thousand horsemen were strung out from east to west in a single line four miles long. In the center and to the fore rode Ed Lash with the little group of thirty men who were bunched up tight. The map case of General Angeles banged against his shoulder as the bugles called again and the entire four mile line swept forward at a trot in a weaving movement. More bugle calls. Again the cheers from the now moving trains. The cannon cars were pushing forward at a pace with the four mile line of jogging horsemen.

Here and there the line broke as men jumped down to cut or shoot wires apart. They mounted and soon pulled up. Some grew impatient and went forward at a lope. Villa signalled and the buglers pulled them down, machachos! Save their wind. There are many miles yet to go. And if things go bad a good horse is worth more than gold pesos in the bank. Hold them down machachos!

The line moved on. They crossed irrigation ditches, the horses scrambling and grunting up the slippery banks. The town grew nearer and still nearer until finally the outlines of the roundhouse and water tower began to take shape.

The battle for Palacio Gomez was beginning. By the time they got in and the infantry could come up the darkness they so loved would be down.

It was to be another of the dreaded night attacks. The sign was "Zaragosa." The counter sign was "Guerrero."

God help any man who forgot it!

CHAPTER XVII

SOMEWHERE along the line of jogging, expectant horsemen Lash heard, as though his senses were playing him false, the sound of singing. He glanced along the line from whence it came. He saw a ragged man astride a bony little mountain pony; a man fully sixty years of age.

The voice was high, unmusical, and words clear:

"I don't want to be a Porfirista,
I don't want to be an Orozquista,
I just want to be a fighter for Madero. . . ."

"Mule!" came a laughing voice. "Madero is dead. He was murdered in the Palacio Nacional in Mexico City by Huerta and his killers. You are a Car-

ranzista now, you goat!"

Somebody laughed and the laughter went down the line of few horsemen. The old one turned toward the heckler, his brown peon face serious.

"These things I do not know," he called. "I am only a simple man. All my life I lived on my little rancho and tended my goats and my farm. Then came the Federals—and then the colorados. They stole my goats and took my maise. When the Maderistas came they did not steal from me. So I am a fighter for Madero. They tell me that over the hills a few leagues away is a great land where the Gringos live with big towns where no goats are driven through the streets. The thing I do not believe."

"But it is so," called back the heckler. "My brother, who was killed in the fighting at Ojinaga, near El Paso, has seen these very things. He says it is so. They do not drive goats through the streets of the Gringo towns."

"Well," called back the old man disgustedly, "then I am glad I am not a Gringo. I would not want to live in such a place!"

The line went forward, ever forward, and there in the afternoon sun lay the buildings of Palico Gomez. It was just before sundown.

It was just about then that the first Federal shell exploded.

It fell four hundred yards short, throwing up a mushroom of torn earth in the center of a green field. Its sharp *whee . . . pam!* shocked their ear drums. Four hundred yards. More shells, more bugles. The line increased its pace until some of the horses were galloping. The trains were now far behind. The Federals had torn up the tracks for miles out, to prevent Villa's cannons from coming within range. They had half expected that he would not wait for his cannon.

And they had been right. Villa, with his usual contempt for Huerta's forces and the hated *colorados,* had not disappointed them. He was calculating his time and his forces. He could go in with the cavalry and feel them out. If the going was too tough, he could retreat while his three thousand infantrymen came up through the darkness at a trot, brushing past the fields on their leather *huarachas,* rifles ready.

But he would try them out with the cavalry. Many times before they had looked out from back of their barricades and seen that long line of raggedly dressed horsemen moving in; those terrible fellows who rode straight into the mouth of the cannon because it meant land and liberty. The Federals had seen them coming and fled without a fight. It had happened many times. If it happened again many lives would be saved and much ammunition conserved.

That was why Villa had decided not to wait for the cannon, now eight miles out while the workmen worked frantically to extend the rails closer to town, before attacking.

The second shell came. This one was a hundred yards short. The Federal gunners were getting the range. The line broke forward at run but again the buglers pulled them down. Wait, machachos! Hold them down! A good horse is better than a tired horse when retreating. Rein them up!

Villa's blocky body rocked in the saddle as, with reins tight, he went forward in the center of the line. General Angeles was no longer present. Villa had, brusquely, ordered him to the rear. Carranza needed him. He was too valuable a man to be killed.

Lash could see the town plainly now; the torn up railroad tracks leading right up to the roundhouse. The big water tower painted so black it gleamed

in the late afternoon sun. Further over some adobe walls. The roofs had been demolished to give the men back of them room for firing.

And there was Brittingham Corral. The famous corral that forever would live in revolutionary memory.

It was to run with blood where, back of its walls at staggered high and low portholes, lay Huerta's machine gunners with long, flexible belts of ammunition piled high on the ground beside the tripods; the blunt, ugly, water-cooled snouts protruding through openings. Waiting.

In the distance beyond the town Cerro de la Pila's peak looked down, as though haughty in the knowledge that it nestled to its rocky bosom the town's water reservoir.

TREES, smokestacks, the buildings of the big soap works, adobe walls and more buildings. Waiting machine gunners, and a long line of horsemen loping in.

And to the south, along the base of the mountains, the road wound to Torreon. Palacio Gomez was the gate to that rich city, and that gate must be swung wide. It must be swung wide in the face of a full Federal Army, plus the eight hundred Red Flaggers who had fled from Mapimi when old General Urbina drove in from the east.

The Federal cannon were booming now in chorus, the gunners getting the range. There was to Lash's ears something serene and confident in the evenly spaced *whee . . . pams!* He now rode fifty yards to the right of Villa, still in the midst of his staff. Villa was still signalling with his arms and the buglers were still calling out their jerky notes at a gallop. The boom, the shrill whine, the cloud of earth mushrooming. Horses began to fall, kicking and screaming. Some of the riders did not move. Others got up to stagger, to fall again, to start running back to the rear. A shell lit squarely amid eight horsemen and for a moment obscured them. Lash, spurring the black forward, saw seven men emerge, fighting fear crazed horses wheel them and go on again.

"God," an uneducated peon once had said, "is always on the side of Francisco Villa in battle."

The cannon entrenched on the plain by the city were still throwing shells with methodical precision, telling of men working smoothly, unhurriedly, confidently; and Lash, fighting a suddenly frightened black, could almost see the ammunition handlers tossing shells to the loader. The bright brass disappearing. The whang of the breech block going home and locked. A gunner at the eyepiece, sighting, jerking a lanyard.

Villa spurred by, his mount now covered by lather and with bloody foam dripping out around the cruel bit. He was yelling orders at his buglers. The line was wavering a little because of the gaps in it. Behind them all lay horse carcasses by the score while others staggered around or lay kicking.

"Go on in!" he was screaming at a befuddled Colonel. "The Infantry is coming up."

He swung over and came almost up alongside of Lash, who was still fighting the crazed black.

"How do you like it?" bellowed *El General,* spurring up closer. "Still going to win that bet?"

"Not anymore than the others," Ed Lash yelled back. "And I'll beat you into Gomez."

"Another hundred dollars you don't."

"Where's your cannon?" Lash roared. "They're cutting you to pieces at point blank range."

"The damned track is torn up for

miles back!" yelled Villa in answer. "But we won't need them. The infantry is coming up on the run. They'll get here at dark, and if we haven't taken the town by then, they'll show those Huerta machachos a few things."

It was about then that the waiting machine guns in the Brittingham Corral opened up at eight hunded yards and cut Ed Lash's black horse from beneath him.

He fell free and struck his face hard into the dirt, the now blood soaked earth where men were fighting and dying beneath a golden Mexican sky; and he thought, *This is a hell of a thing. I've lost a horse at eight hundred yards of chance shooting that the rebels need badly.*

He heard screams, some of them human, and saw more horses going down. Dazedly, his head swimming, he wiped at the blood trickling from his nose and began crawling toward a dry, shallow irrigation ditch head; deep enough to shield a man's body. He wasn't too worried about getting hit. Eight hundred yards was a long range, even for machine guns throwing out five hundred and fifty a minute—but they had had good targets.

He fell panting into the ditch, and he thought crazily, *What in the hell am I doing in this mess anyhow? I must be a damned fool.*

IT WAS a passing thought, flitting through his mind and then gone again. He wasn't fighting for Villa. He knew that Villa was both good and bad. He personally didn't care if the man came out alive or not. He certainly wasn't fighting for a New Republic of Mexico. He thought that there should be one; he was certain that out of all this blood and death that there would come a better one than was now in control with an old Indian killer sitting on the throne in Mexico City.

He found himself beginning to laugh crazily, unaware that all the tension of the past days, from the time he entered Jim Abernathy's office to the present—the emotion over little Maria, his new found feeling for Gloria Holden—it was all breaking loose; a safety valve for his hatreds, fears, desires.

That was it. He was fighting for Maria. His soul would never rest until the man over there back of these machine guns was dead. After that . . . he tried to think.

He lay there in the ditch and wiped more blood from his nose and thought of Buck Stinson. Beyond Buck he couldn't think. Up north there was a matter to be settled. Faces again. Whitley and Steward, gun packing men backing up Colonel Holden. He wished to God that they were down here now, right in this very ditch. So they were "warriors" who would kill a few 'greasers', were they?

He felt a hand on his face and looked up into a brown one. "You are hurt, compañero?"

Lash struggled up and pushed a hand across his face. He spat into the dirt of the wet ditch.

"No," he said. "I was just wondering if you had a bottle of beer handy."

The man peered closer. It was the old mountain fellow who had sung in the line. His bony little pony, too, had gone down in that line of machine gun bullets.

"Aha!" the *viejo*—the old one—said. "A Gringo! Tell me something, Señor. I am very much worried. Is it true that they do not drive the goats through the towns in the United States?"

"It is quite true," Lash assured him.

"But I am a goat herder!" protested the old one. "What kind of a place is this that they have no goats?"

"I am beginning to think," Ed Lash

said solemnly, "that right now it would be a damned good place to be in."

He twisted around to get the canteen he had grabbed off his saddle, and a man came crawling along the ditch toward him, his right leg dragging.

"Dirty, murdering colorados," he cursed. "My horse fell on me when the ametralladoras opened up. A drink of water, campañero. I am dying of thirst."

Lash gave him the canteen. He was dying but not of thirst. He had been shot twice through the lungs and was spitting red froth.

Lash drank and then leaned back against the bank, a new, ominous sound coming to his ears. It grew nearer and nearer and then a line of horsemen, with long gaps showing in their ranks, shot over the ditch and fled back northward toward the far distant trains.

Villa's cavalry had been thrown back and was in full retreat.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE cannon drummed on, interspersed by an increase in the machine gun fire. There was a new tone in the song of the guns; something heavy and reckless. The gunners saw the line break, wheel, and spur away in wild and disorderly retreat, and they had opened up with everything to speed Villa's fleeing men on their way. At eight hundred yards Lash could hear the faint yells of triumph floating in the clear air of sundown. Mingled with them came the crack of Mauser rifles, the sights raised very high. The Federals were firing in sheer exhuberation.

Down along the ditch, some thirty feet away, a peon lay coughing and kicking out his life. Further along a few others, unhorsed as Lash had been, were firing back. If the Federals should come out now, those few men in the ditches before the very gates of Gomez would be slaughtered.

They didn't come out. Lash didn't bother to unlimber his rifle and fire back, taking long distance pot shots at hats no bigger than pin heads sticking up above adobe walls. He lay and waited. The infantry would be coming in through the darkness. He could see them out there to the north, seemingly miles and miles away, a dark brown mass moving on foot through the green. They appeared to be in no hurry. It was not yet dark. In the darkness a man didn't make such a good target for the machine guns and the snipers resting their rifles over the top of the walls.

The man who had been shot through the lungs was dying. His face was contorted, though the first shock of pain was past. The dried up little mountain man squatted beside him. He lay on his back, red showing under the edge of the blanket strapped over one shoulder. His toes, sticking out of the worn leather sandals — *harachas* — stuck straight up in the air and Lash noted with an odd thought that one of the big toes was missing. Possibly from snake bite.

"A cigarette, amigo?" he asked the viejo.

The old man fumbled in his white cotton blouse and then looked helplessly at Ed Lash. Lash broke out the last of the several packs of cigarettes he had brought with him and handed over one. The *viejo* lit it, took a few extra long drags and inserted it between the other's lips. The old one sighed with satisfaction and the dying man sighed too.

"What name do you go by?" the old one asked.

"Pedro."

"And the town?"

He named a town, though Lash

couldn't quite catch the name. It was over on the edge of the Yaqui lands.

"Ah, those Yaquis," the old one said. "They always fight with the devoltosos because they hate the government. They fight until the Federals have been driven away, and then go home to their lands and their women. Those bronco Yaquis! The mansitos—the tame ones—they are too lazy to fight."

"Where do you come by?" asked the man on his back.

"The Durango mountains. I am a ranchero," with pride. "I have nine goats and much land. One hundred paces east and west. But the Federals and the colorados come to steal my goods and so I fight."

"I, too. I was in the fields when the armies first came by. I said to Lucia—we had been loving seven months then—that I would go fight in the revolution. She did not want to go. She was with first child. But I said, 'Who will follow me to cook my tortillas? Am I an old woman who must bend over a cooking pot? I am a fighter in the revolution. . . .'"

He paused and Lash noted that the sun was going down. He wondered if it was true that a man died easily at sundown. The *viejo* had taken the cigarette from the limp fingers and was smoking it. He turned to Lash and said, sadly, "What will happen to my goats if the Federals come while I am away?"

Lash had unslung his glasses and was peering back to the north. He saw, miles away, the cavalry beginning to reform under the tongue lashings of the hard spurring officers, but always that brown mass of men out there moved on and on and on, like some inexorable wall that would roll over the walls of Palacio Gomez and engulf the waiting men.

It had grown quiet. In an alamo tree a bird began a twilight song. From somewhere off in the distance came the bawl of a cow. The mountains far away threw off purple shadows. The sun went down and dusk fell. It was followed by swift darkness. The infantry was close now, not more than a mile away. Lash gave the old one another of his precious cigarettes. They lay in the ditch and waited.

THEN the silence lost itself in the faint murmur of thousands of feet moving through the fields, coming nearer and nearer, and here and there came a shouted command. It might have been Villa. It might have been a lowly non-commissioned officer. Lash rolled over and unslung his rifle and the old one did likewise.

"They are coming," the old one said.

They came, they seemed to gain momentum as they reached the ditch, and before Ed Lash was aware of it they were pouring across in a yelling mass, running through the fields at a jog trot. The machine guns opened up again, their distant shouts now lashes of living flame. White in the night. Lash rose out of the ditch and something struck him a terrific blow above the right eye and tore a gash in the skin; a rock dislodged by a bullet fired from eight hundred yards away. It knocked him down flat on his face and put him out for how long he didn't know.

He came to in a strange world in which millions of figures were running and screaming—running back. They had gone in to within two hundred yards and been cut down in the night, thrown back, terrorized. Panic had seized them and they were fleeing, throwing away rifles, canteens, blankets.

It was a rout.

Lash got to his feet, blinded in one eye from the blood pouring from the

cut. He knew that he ought to go on; that now was the time to slip into Gomez. Stinson was there and Stinson had murdered little Maria and left word for him to come.

But some kind of a fear seized him. It was something contagious like a strange disease beating into his brain. He kept thinking that this time the Federals would take advantage and come out. He reeled to his feet and began to run with the thousands around him. The fields, now beaten and trampled, gave back rustling sounds as thousands of running feet threshed through, sending soft white boles of fluffy cotton flying. They ran head on into a fence, hitting it like stampeding cattle, fell aside, got up and crawled through; trotting on again, gulping in great sobs of the cold night air.

Out of the night appeared mounted horsemen. The horses were running. That meant officers. They always rode at a run. The officers were yelling and cursing.

"Go back!" they screamed. "Go back. More men are coming up to help you. Go back and fight, you cowardly sheep!"

Some ran on. The shock of authority brought others up and drove saneness in to replace panic. A man yelled, "Where is my rifle? I dropped it but a little ways back."

"You ran over me," jeered another. "You are the big fat one but you run like a wild burro with the vaqueros after it. I never thought a man with such a big belly could run so fast. You coward!"

Somebody started laughing amid the curses. Ed Lash stumbled on, half out on his feet. The whole side of his face was covered with blood and he felt weak. He kept thinking crazily that he ought to go back, that Buck Stinson was waiting for him; that Villa had blundered badly in attacking before the tracks were relaid far enough ahead to get his cannon within range of the town's walls.

He didn't remember how far he walked and how long he stumbled. He came out of it to see the lights of the trains in the distance; a hundred fires where hundreds of wild maniacs had flung themselves upon the roadbed and were slamming rails into place.

A man's voice called out weakly, "Compañero, help me."

Lash went over and bent above the man. Four others came by carrying an object in a blanket. The man Lash bent over sat beneath a lone mesquite tree at the edge of a field.

"What is it?" he asked.

The soldier struggled to his feet, standing on one leg. The other had been blown off at the ankle. One of the cavalrymen who had gone in for the first attack. The leg was bound up in bloody rags torn from a trouser leg. He put his arm around Lash's neck and began to hop.

"Zaragosa!" came sharply through the night, followed at once by the crash of a Springfield rifle. Lash and the soldier fell forward into the trampled corn.

"No, you thick headed burro!" snarled another man's disgusted voice. "You call for the password, wait for the countersign, and *then* shoot at them."

"Well, what difference does it make?" snorted the disgruntled sentry. "I never hit anybody I shoot at anyhow."

"For the love of the Virgin, how much further to the hospital train?" cried out another voice.

It was confusion, it was unreal. It was slaughter, death, war. It was plain madness.

It was hell!

CHAPTER XIX

LASH hailed two men coming by on a horse, for the man with an arm around his neck was collapsing. The two stopped. The horse's head hung low, as though it was ready to drop. It had survived the cavalry charge.

The two stopped and the rider swung down. The man back of the cantle, a bloody rag around his head, stared vacantly into the night and saw nothing.

"We will put him across the saddle," the dismounted man said. "I will lead the horse."

"No, I can ride!" protested the man with one foot. "I am the best rider in the Constitutionalist Army. Help me up, and may Our Lady of the Guadalupe bless all your sons."

"She'll send my soul to hell for having three wives," said the other, cupping his interlaced fingers, palms up. "Here, up! Put your good foot in my hands and I will boost you. These pelones! They had a thousand shells for every cannon and their machine guns were like mosquitos swarming around a duck pond."

They disappeared into the night and Ed Lash stumbled on. He was mad at the useless slaughter, at the war, at himself for being in it. He was mad because of the gash over one eye that had prevented him from going on into Palacio Gomez to keep an appointment with Buck Stinson.

He came in sight of the bonfires, punctured through by the brighter eye of the engine's headlight back of the repair cars and cannon. Mounted guards were riding back and forth, rifles at ready, challenging all who approached. Lash couldn't understand why Villa hadn't unloaded his cannon and pulled them up into position with the mules. It could have been done in a matter of hours and shells dropped into the city. But nobody, not even General Angeles, ever knew exactly what Villa would do. Nobody but *El General.*

"Andale! Andale!" came the steady bellows of a half dozen impatient mounted officers, riding up and down the line of frantic workmen. "Villa needs these guns. Another mile or two, compañeros and we'll be in range. *Andale! Andale!"*

Far to the south the guns were rumbling in the night, the Federal cannon still working. Perhaps that was the answer. Villa wanted them to use up all their ammunition in the darkness. The flashes could be seen, lightning pin points in the darkness, and amid them was the faint popping of rifles and machine guns. They were now but six miles away.

Lash went past the workmen. Off to one side a man lay sprawled on his face, his hands dug deep into the land for which he was fighting. He hadn't quite made it back. Three more lay on their backs a few feet further over. They were snoring loudly. Horses came out of the darkness carrying double burdens. Other men staggered along alone. The guns rumbled on. Somebody said that the cavalry had dismounted and gone in again on foot. Nobody knew.

Lash went past the cannon cars and found El Niño. Diaz was down on the ground with another bottle of champagne. He had found a new supply someplace.

"Ha!" he yelled gleefully at sight of Ed Lash's bloody face. "So you came back with a scratch, eh? It makes no difference. Tomorrow we will be in range and then we'll show these devils. Ah, my niño, my baby! Just wait until I get you unlimbered. Here, have a drink. Tomorrow we will fight some more. The cabrones!"

Lash took the drink and went on

back along the train. It had been broken up and was about half length. Back of it two hospital trains were waiting. Around them was a packed mass of humanity, made worse by howling women hunting for their men, shouting questions. Had anybody seen Juan? Pablo? Felipe? Franco was dead and his wife was having a baby on a flat car.

Forty of the Mexican and American doctors were working at tables set up on the ground outside the cars, assisted by a hundred nurses. The other twenty, back in the operating cars, were taking care of the more seriously wounded. Lash saw the reporters and Abernathy moving among the wounded, asking a hundred questions. How was it? How was the battle going? How many had been killed?

One man said three hundred. Another said three thousand. They had fought like devils but the cannon and ametralledoras were too many. Those Rurales had shot like demons and then ran out to meet them and shoot some more. Ah, they were tough ones, those Rurales!

CHAPTER XX

THE reporters had been given strict orders not to leave the trains under any circumstances. Abernathy waited with them in their car until sundown, when the battle began, while they smoked and talked and played poker. They ate a supper of stew, biscuits, coffee and pie prepared by the Chinese cook and at dark Abernathy left them and moved on down toward the front of the engine. There had been considerable switching on a siding during the afternoon after the cavalry had gone on ahead to open the battle. Their car with the lounging cameramen was on the fourth train back, two hospital trains up ahead, and then the repair train with the cannon in front. He passed the nurses' car and inquired for Gloria.

She swung down and he said, "How are you?"

"All right, I guess, Jim. It's going to be terrible. I hope they can get it over with soon."

"Suppose they do?" he asked. "You'll go on?"

"I don't know," she said. "This whole thing is so confusing. I don't suppose you've heard anything of Lash?"

"He went in with the cavalry. He'll be back."

"Perhaps, Jim. But he won't go north again until Gomez is taken."

"Buck Stinson. I imagine not. He loved Maria too much not to get the man who did what Stinson did."

It was his attempt at continually letting her know that Lash had loved little Maria. A try at arousing jealousy and resentment. But her face told him nothing, and he somehow felt baffled, angry; and jealous.

"They are," he said, "allowing us to go forward at three o'clock in the morning, if things go right. A Colonel gave reporters and cameramen permission."

"So you're going up?" she inquired.

He nodded. "As long as I'm here I might as well see the fuss. Frankly, Gloria, this whole idea of you and I being down here is completely stupid. We could have stayed right in Chihuahua City until a hospital train came through and gone back home. You've no business down here."

"Possibly. But I'll go back only when the three of us can go—you, Lash, and myself."

"Lash might not get back," he said darkly. "The reporters got a message a few minutes ago from the Colonel

who's giving us permission to go forward early in the morning. The first wave of cavalry was slaughtered. Lash was in it. If he wasn't hit, he'll still go ahead with this idea of finding Buck Stinson. You know he can't wait until they retreat—if they do. You know Lash too well. He'll go into Gomez alone to find Stinson. So suppose he doesn't come back? Then?"

"I don't know," she said, and he saw tiredness and indecision in her face. "I'll decide when the time comes."

From the hospital operating cars came a call for all nurses and she left him there. Abernathy looked out across the fields. Horsemen out there by the hundreds seemed to be coming in. The first of the wounded were beginning to arrive.

The trickle grew into a stream and the stream into a torrent as the night wore on. Sweating doctors back of tables piled high with bandages and medicine made quick dressings of wounds and passed on to the next man. There was no time for anything but speed. Gloria worked alongside the bearded doctor who had taken care of Maria. She handed out bandages and medicines and dressed one minor wound after another in a blur of faces until, suddenly, another loomed up.

It was a tired, drawn, swarthy face, the right side of which was covered with blood. A sharp cry broke from her. "Lash! Oh, Lash, you're wounded!"

A reporter pushed in and began speaking broken Spanish, then saw his mistake. "An American! Fighting in the field with Villa as a common soldier. This will make a good story for the press back home. What's your name, Mac?"

"Mac," Lash said.

"Did you get into Gomez?"

"No," snarled Ed Lash while the pain of the antiseptic with which Gloria was washing the deep gash made his lips turn into thin lines. "I went to Torreon to get a glass of beer."

She finished bandaging his head, her anxious eyes on his face. "You're going back again?"

"Stinson is still in there," he said.

"Oh, Lash, be careful, will you?"

He looked at her and grinned, some of the old bitterness coming back. It was instinct, that. You thought you had hated a woman and now you were in love with her.

"Will you go back with me to Arizona? Alone?" he asked.

"I—I don't know, Lash. Give me time to think."

. "If I get back," he said, "I'll have to meet your father. It won't be as friends."

Then he was gone into the night.

ABERNATHY went back to the car and slept until two-thirty in the morning. When he and the grumbling reporters and cameramen got up they could still hear the rumble of the guns in the night. The trains had inched up another two miles. They were within four miles of Palacio Gomez.

And Gomez was still grimly in Federal hands.

It was still bitter cold as the group of reporters wrapped their blankets around them and went down to where the fires still burned and the workmen still hammered away. They had been lucky, those workmen. The supply of rails would have run out except that the Federals had merely unbolted them and thrown them aside and then ripped up a few ties and tried to burn others. They hadn't taken time or trouble to twist the rails. Not with so many cannon entrenched around the city. Let Villa come in. They would show him.

They had shown him. His first cavalry charge had been slaughtered,

horses and men. His *mechachos* going in on foot and suffered worse. Now it was a night battle of thousands of men lying in the darkness firing at thousands of other men they could not see. Several ox-carts drawn by horses and mules were making steady trips from the ammunition cars to the front, loaded with boxes of cartridges for the men out there.

At daylight Abernathy found himself alone. The others had gone each their own way. One camerman was up in an alamo tree, shooting long range shots of the town and the dust haze over it. The trains now were within two miles of Gomez. They had built six miles of track through the night. Artillerymen had unloaded their cannon and swung them out in a field in a row. Even as the first shell roared in and threw up a dust cloud from a distant adobe wall Abernathy saw four big columns of black smoke rise up over the city of Palacio Gomez.

The Federals were collecting their dead into piles, soaking them with oil, and burning them.

He heard the second explosive roar of a Villa cannon. It struck the boiler of a locomotive in the roundhouse yards and exploded it with a crash that shook the town.

Vague shapes were staggering across the fields. Some moved on dazedly. Others fell, got up again and kept on walking, some dogged instinct sending them back to the cars where the sixty doctors and the nurses had worked all night. Somebody had said they thought that a hospital train would be pulling out northward pretty soon with the more seriously wounded aboard. Abernathy, within a mile of town now, had forgotten it. He knew that when the time came for him to meet Ed Lash in a gun fight that that hard faced man, who could love as brutally as he hated, would emerge the victor. But down here all was confusion, death. He forgot the hospital train.

For he too was going into Gomez. Let Villa and his peons fight for what they thought they wanted. He knew what he wanted.

He crawled over, stripped the Mauser rifle and ammunition belt from a dead soldier, and lay in the ditch and waited.

The battle roared all that day—Wednesday—and all that night again. The shells fell continually and the black smoke plumes from Palacio Gomez once more rose into the sky. Brittingham Corral had been taken by men without rifles, slipping up through the darkness with homemade bombs which they lighted from cigars and tossed through the portholes. They slaughtered all within, took the corral, were driven out again. Three thousand men had died in there. Again the smoke plumes as the bodies were dragged out, soaked with oil, and burned.

THE battle continued. They had gotten all the way into the streets and been driven out again. Abernathy worked his way forward and finally came to the railroad trestle not far from the roundhouse. He slid beneath it, the ironical thought penetrating his mind that he might be able to beat Lash into Gomez.

A group of men lay huddled down below the edge of the bank. They lay with the lean, calm faces of the dead, all pierced by steel jacketed Mauser bullets. They had been stripped of all clothing by their companions. One, a boy of not more than fifteen, had been shot squarely through the mouth. The sight left the lawyer unmoved. He felt disgust well up within him at the thought of men who would foolishly slaughter each other this way.

Theirs was a different world from his. They fought because somebody had made vague promises of land and liberty. They had liberty now; liberty to kill and loot and even rape, if they wanted to. What more liberty for a man than to be given full authority to shoot as many of his fellow men as possible while his ammunition lasted?

Abernathy felt differently. His world was one in which it was every man for himself. And the fact that he was crawling beneath a railroad trestle with a dead man's rifle in his hands encompassed that world. This was a personal battle for the gain that he wanted; and if he could attain it by risking his own life to kill the man who stood in his way, then so much the better.

Six men sat playing cards beneath the trestle not far from where the dead men lay. Another, a cigarette dangling from his lips, had propped up two dead men for a seat and was methodically banging away at something or another over in town. The card players looked up and one of them grinned and spoke in Spanish.

Abernathy shook his head. One of the others jabbered to the rest and then said in broken English, "Hey, Meester, what are you doing here?"

"I want to go into town," Abernathy grunted. "I've got to find a man."

The interpretation of that one brought loud laughter.

"He wants to find a woman, my companion says," replied the man who could speak a little English. "Have you any food? Caramba. We have not eaten for almost twenty-four hours."

"I have no food," Jim Abernathy replied shortly.

It wouldn't have made any difference to him if they were starving. He had other things on his mind. For he was going into Gomez. He was going to beat Ed Lash in there to prove to himself that he was a better man—and then kill him at the first opportunity.

This was the chance Jim Abernathy needed and he was taking it. He couldn't picture a world without Gloria, and as long as that hard bitten man who could get out and fight as a common soldier to get at Buck Stinson was alive, there would be no world for the lawyer.

One of them had to go.

It was going to be Lash.

CHAPTER XXI

CAPTAIN ODNETA, a big, calm faced man, slid beneath the trestle. The card players paid him no heed. They were absorbed in their game. The man with the dead men for a seat was still banging away. About two hundred yards further east in what had been a Federal trench scores of dusty, tired soldiers lay firing. A few slept.

"How goes it?" he asked Abernathy in perfect English; he had played football at an American university.

"I am merely observing."

"You're one of those reporter fellows, aren't you? You shouldn't have a rifle, my friend."

"A souvenir."

"I hear reports that Villa is discharging all Americans when we take Gomez. Those who want to stay can sign papers renouncing their citizenship."

"How is the battle?" grunted the lawyer.

"Going very poorly. Villa's ammunition is almost gone."

"Will they retreat?"

Odneta laughed softly and looked at the lawyer. "We are throwing everything into a final night attack tonight. They're getting the artillery set up again and ammunition piled. The men will go in under a barrage. This time we'll stay."

"A direct assault?"

A nod. "The Brigada Zaragosa has been cut up pretty badly but is being reformed. General Robles and General Contreras have been sent for by Villa. They've been swinging in from the south and attacking. This time we'll make it."

He went on down the ditch and Abernathy, parched with thirst, had to stick it out until again the sun went down and the cannon broke out anew. The shells poured in around Brittingham Corral, where the machine guns still chattered away, and some of Captain Treston's answered back. A roll of men came up out of the dith and in the darkness ran forward.

And with them went a man who was risking his own life because he hated another man enough to do so.

The night became an inferno as Abernathy, looking much like another soldier in his dirty clothes, entered the streets, ducking over walls and in back of buildings. He passed a pile of charred bodies ten feet high and then, a little further on, another pile. Others lay sprawled in the dust; Rurales and Federals. They had been killed by cannon fire.

The lawyer began working his way into the main part of town, looking for the best hotel. There he most likely would find the Federal officers. There he would find Stinson or General Minor. Buck had failed once. Perhaps this time, down here in Gomez, he wouldn't fail again.

Here and there mounted officers galloped back and forth, shouting commands. One of them was shot from his horse almost in front of the place where Abernathy stood. He weighed the chances of grabbing the horse, decided against it, and went at a run toward the part of town where the buildings appeared to be the bigger. He was almost alone now, his rifle gone. The Federals might think him another American businessman or reporter.

Suddenly he rounded a corner and a mounted officer pulled up, staring. He levelled a pistol and began to speak Spanish. Abernathy shook his head and spoke the words, *"Fuentes, el Americano."* He repeated them again and again while the man with the pistol sat staring. A shell exploded two hundred yards away and a piece of it slashed hard against a nearby wall. The officer motioned with his pistol. Abernathy set off up the street while the officer paced him. They went for three blocks and then turned in where a big two-story building stood on a corner. Around it were a dozen horses being held by soldiers. Officers hurried in and out. Abernathy thought he heard a portable telegraph key ticking.

The officer got down and went inside, forcing Abernathy ahead of him. He began to bark in Spanish at the other officers and the lawyer heard the name Fuentes, while his stomach got tighter. For he saw in their faces that they were battle weary, their nerves on edge; theirs were faces that knew Villa had done it again. They had thrown him back and slaughtered him. He came in for more and they slaughtered him again. And now when the fool knew he was whipped he was doggedly ripping the town apart in the face of another attack which was succeeding. This time his dogs of soldiers were in to stay.

THERE was more jabbering from one officer to another, then nods toward Abernathy. A man ran out, jumped on a horse, and rode off. The telegraph key in a corner clicked away with a dozen Federal and two Rurale officers around it. Abernathy didn't know that they were in touch with General Velasco in Torreon, who was promising to send more help in a day or so.

Somebody laughed sarcastically. The damned rebels already practically had the town, and Velasco was going to send help!

Ten minutes later more horses clattered up and Jim Abernathy heaved a big sigh of relief. Buck Stinson had arrived.

Stinson strode in in the uniform of a Federal officer, his spurs clanking. He came across the room and a grin broke from his coarse face at sight of the visitor.

He said, "What in the hell are you doing here, Jim?"

Abernathy said, "Lash got your message."

"Yeah?"

"One of Villa's patrols found the girl. She was still alive when they got her to the hospital train. She managed to tell Lash what you said just before she died. Gloria was with her."

"So Lash fell into the trap? I knew he would. He'll try to come in here ahead of the armies, and that's what I'm waiting for."

"I hope you make it, Buck. This whole business is completely insane. Lash risking almost certain death to get at you. You killing the girl to make him come after you. Why don't you wait and settle it up north? You've got to get out, I think. Villa is discharging all his American soldiers, and even if you stick things don't look too good."

"If you mean are we retreating, it looks that way. But don't you worry about it, Jim. Buck Stinson can take care of himself. I want Lash for killing my brother and I'm going to get him in my own way. I want that money you promised me, and I'll get that too." He paused and his coarse, cruel face now grew suspicious. "You wouldn't," he said with strange softness, "have any ideas about pulling a double cross on me, now, would you, Jim?"

Abernathy was parched with thirst. His voice had become almost a croak. He said, "I gave you my word when we framed the deal in La Gorda's hotel in Chihuahua. You fell down on that one, Buck. That's why I had to come in and risk my life in a mess that I personally am sickened of. I saw dead men out there in the street. Piles of them, burned. I saw others sprawled around, killed by Villa's cannon, his machine guns, and his snipers. I wouldn't have felt any differently if there had been ten times that many. I wouldn't have cared if their bodies had been so thick in the streets that I would have had to step on them. I have one object in mind, Buck: to get Ed Lash. You understand that?"

Stinson nodded toward a water cooler in the corner and led the way over. "Sure," he said, a half sneering grin on his face. "Gloria. She always went for Lash because he wouldn't go for her. That's a damned woman for you every time. But that's your affair. Ah, here comes Minor."

General Minor came in. He too was dressed in the uniform of a Federal General now. His black eyes above the sagging bags took in Abernathy, shot a question at Stinson, then he turned and went to the portable telegraph outfit. Stinson chuckled.

"The old boy was pretty happy when he got free of Villa's patrols—and one of them gave us a run!—but now I'm beginning to think he's a little sorry he traded horses across a fence. We've lost a lot of them, Jim. Minor gave the commanding General here and Colonel Argumendo the whole setup about Villa's strength, but the fools didn't half believe him. Thought he was putting it on big to make an impression and get his commission with the Federals. Well, he got it and now I got a hunch the Feds wish they had believed him."

They drank, Abernathy gulping down glass after glass of water. Stinson said, listening, "Hold it a minute!"

He went over to the portable telegraph outfit clicking in a corner of the lobby next to the patio. The officers were still crowded around. Out in the night the distant crash of the cannon drummed on and mingled with it came rifle and machine gun fire that seemed to get nearer and nearer. Villa was driving the Federals out of the north side of town.

Stinson sighed and came back. "Well," he said, and there was for the first time, Abernathy noted, something tired in his voice. "The order has just come through."

"Order?"

"We're abandoning Gomez and heading south for Torreon. Another big scrap there, I suppose. Funny, Torreon has been taken and retaken seven times in three years. Now they go at it again."

"What do you plan to do?" the lawyer asked. He still hoped that Stinson would be the man to meet and have it out with that hard bitten man who now most likely was already in town, hunting for "Fuentes." "Going with them? Returning to Arizona?"

"I am," Buck Stinson said, "going up to my room and have a drink. Damn the war anyhow. I think I've had enough of it."

CHAPTER XXII

BUCK STINSON had been almost right about Lash. He had gotten partly into town. He had fought the battle all through those hours, watching Brittingham Corral be taken and retaken. One of the reporters had said he saw Villa leading that first raid, a lighted cigar in his hand for the two home-made bombs he carried. Most of the time Lash lay in a ditch back of a wall and listened to the firing; waiting patiently. Unfortunately, on that last evening of the three day fight for Gomez, Captain Treston had come running up with five of his machine guns, and had stumbled right on top of Lash. He let out a bawl of joy.

"Lash! Where the hell have you been? Get on one of these guns quick and show these boys how to set one up. The Rurales are about to attack."

Lash grunted back a curse but he obeyed. His bandage was blood encrusted and covered with dirt, and the eye below it was swollen almost shut. He grabbed the Maxim and went to work, snapping out orders in Spanish to the men carrying the long flexible belts of cartridges.

He thought differently about the Rurales. They were the ones who had rounded up the peons and shipped them to Moreles to die under the lash in the heat on the great plantations. They were the ones who cheerfully, almost joyfully, obeyed the dictum of Diaz's famous telegram of four years before. *Catch in the act. Kill on the spot.*

He set up the gun, checked the mechanism, fed in a belt and jerked the cocking handle twice to pull the first shell over into the feedway and then down into the chamber. Ten minutes before the final barrage of Villa's cannon opened up for the last assault on the town, the Rurales came out. Brave fellows. Stolid. Hard and cruel and merciless because they had been taught that way. These peons were dogs, hungry, ragged, untrained dogs who belonged under the lash. They should be shown. Lash saw the first high crowned *Chihuahua* sombreros below which were the jackets with the tarnished gold braid, and he checked his sights and opened up. He didn't give a damn about the Rurales. They were

men fighting on one side who would kill on the spot if they got the chance. They never took prisoners.

They were men blocking his path into Gomez to find Buck Stinson.

He opened up with short bursts while Treston lay in the ditch back of the others and bawled orders. He had finally located his two interpreters. But the attack was short and Lash knew that unless something could be done he would be forced to stay with the *ammetralladoras*.

So he did it.

He opened up and threw a two hundred and fifty round belt through the gun at five hundred and fifty a minute. Nothing happened. He fed in the second belt and opened up again.

This time it worked. As the Rurales fell back the gun overheated and jammed. There were no spare barrels and no time to change one had they had another. In the confusion he slipped away, crawled up through a group of snipers who were waiting for the barrage to finish.

He went in with them.

He ran down a side street and a dozen Federal soldiers came out of a shell shattered house, hands in the air. They were going back to surrender. With them were two officers.

Lash felt sorry for the officers. He knew what was in store. Villa shot every one of them on sight. The enlisted men he cared for in his hospital trains along with his own wounded. They had been pressed into service and didn't want to fight. The officers were educated and should know better.

Lash covered them with his pistol as other Villa men came running up to help. He said to an officer, "You are surrendering?"

A stolid nod. "We are tired."

"You will be shot unless you take off those uniforms."

Another stolid nod. "We are tired."

He began to ask them about Fuentes. Did they know where the American *colorado* could be found? They nodded and mentioned the Verde Hotel. Lash left them and ran on. He worked his way by side streets and finally came out back of the hotel. As he arrived he saw a dozen high ranking officers running out of the lobby and jumping on their horses. They had been given the order to retreat, Lash crouched in the alley back of a rubbish heap and waited. He waited five minutes and then more officers arrived. It took him four hours before he could get up the back steps and into a dimly lit hallway. He went in with pistol ready—and a knife. The knife had been taken from a dead Villa soldier.

Down below was much confusion and shouting. Above he heard curses and, strangely enough, the laughter of a woman; shrill, high pitched. A man's laughter came back, drunken.

It was, he thought, a hell of a war.

Over south of town came the impatient signals of engine after engine. They had been prepared hours before, in case of the worst. The worst had happened. Now they were signalling to each other and to the Federal soldiers in town. Those short and, by turn, long blasts were commands. *Get aboard this train. The enemy is coming. The Villistas are too many for you. Come quickly that we may retreat to Torreon and fight again. Get aboard these trains!*

THE cannon fire had died down. The fire of the rifles had grown to intermittent poppings. The machine guns were silent. A few shouts, yells, orders. A door in the hallway back of Lash opened. A voice said, "Hello, Lash."

Ed Lash turned.

Stinson stood there with a revolver in his hand, an old single action .45. He still wore his Federal Uniform. He was grinning.

"I got your message," Ed Lash said. "Come in and have a drink."

He motioned with the pistol and Lash dropped his own. He had thrown away his rifle. Too cumbersome in a hotel room. He carried the knife in his boot. Lash raised his hands and went into the room. He saw Abernathy and he saw General Minor.

"It is," he sneered, "just like old times."

"I beat you in," Abernathy said. "I'm sorry it had to end this way, Ed. But you should have known that though I might be a man of intelligence who doesn't believe in violence, I can still be a man of direct action when there is so much involved. You understand that, of course."

"I'm glad you made it," was the grunted reply. "You tried hard enough in Chihuahua, using your kind of tactics. Leaving the dirty work to a man like Buck, a man for whom you inherently have contempt because he hasn't got your training and your way of thinking."

"That," Stinson said, "will get you nowhere, Ed. Maybe I got certain ideas 'bout Jim along the same lines. My eyes are open where he is concerned. But that I don't give a damn about. I missed fire in La Gorda's hotel in Chihuahua. This time I won't."

"Que dice?" snapped out General Minor. What does he say? Minor looked half drunk.

"I am saying," Lash told him, "that you'd better get the hell out of here and get on those trains. The Federals are retreating. They have been whipped."

Minor shook his head, tugging at one of the mustachio ends. "Ah, no, my friend! I have not forgot what a cowardly machine gunner you are—one who disobeyed orders and then went back to Villa—that bandit dog!—with lies. I shall stay. I have plenty of time. Those stupid peons will not dare come into this town until we have retreated."

"They are," Lash said, "already in part of it."

But Minor was either too drunk or too revengeful to care. He looked at Stinson and he looked at Lash. He grinned.

He lifted the bottle and poured Lash a drink. "The last one you ever will have, my Americano spy. I am personally going to shoot you through the head like any dog of an executed soldier deserves to be shot."

Lash took the liquor; a big tumbler full to the brim. He flung it into Minor's eyes and lunged at Stinson, driving his head deep into the renegade's belly. As they went down, Stinson dropping the gun, Lash reached into his boot and whipped out the knife.

Abernathy dived out of the room, something unusual for him. Perhaps he was afraid of the knife. Perhaps he was going for a gun. Or it might have been plain fear. He ran out and while Minor bellowed, falling over backward in his chair with his eyes burning from the raw whiskey, Ed Lash went after the man who had tried to kill him in La Gorda's hotel. The war was forgotten. Those running men out there in the streets had been put back into the past. They were a thousand miles away. He only knew that he had Stinson at last, Stinson with a knife in his hand; the man who had so brutally shot little Maria Elena Chacon and left her to die out in the desert where the sands of Chihuahua already were red with men's blood.

He broke the frantic grip at his knife

wrist, and this time he watched his groin. When the pile driver knee blow came Lash took it and smashed down into the floor the man he so wanted to kill. Stinson fumbled on the floor for his gun, panting, grunting curses. He got it and brought it up.

And Ed Lash, remembering the girl, did not hesitate.

He cut Buck Stinson's throat with a knife.

CHAPTER XXIII

HE ROSE staggering with Stinson's gun in his hand and struck General Minor a terrific blow over the head. Minor collapsed and did not move again. He leaped into the doorway and too late saw Abernathy. He had a Mauser rifle in one hand and it already was coming up to his shoulder. It crashed and Lash felt as though he had been struck by a locomotive. He vaguely saw Jim Abernathy drop the gun and wheel for a run toward the head of the stairs and that was all he remembered. He lay flat on his face in the doorway of the hotel room, red running from a wound that seemingly had torn away one shoulder.

How long he was out he did not know. He came to and was astonished to find that daylight was showing in through the windows. He had bled badly but the coat and blanket over his shoulder had soaked up the blood, congealed it, and kept him from bleeding to death. He tried to sit up, and finally made it. He sat there in the doorway and made some kind of an effort to collect his senses. Every move brought a groan.

He got to his knees and crawled over past Minor's body on the floor. He presumed that he had crushed in the traitor's skull when he struck him with Stinson's pistol. He didn't look at Stinson. It was over; done. The man was dead. He had paid for his crimes and now all the hard, burning passion seemed to have gone out of Lash's pain wracked body.

He got hold of the bottle and lowered it nearly two inches. The whiskey cut through the pain and the fogginess of his brain and brought him back to some semblance of life. He looked at Minor again and noticed that the man was still breathing. Lash got the pistol in one hand, laid it on the table within reach, then poured some of the contents of the bottle down the man's throat. Minor began to struggle and came alive. He sat up, his great mass of coarse, Indian hair tousled, his mustachio all awry. His eyes were bloodshot and he stifled a groan as he put his hand to the egg sized lump on his head.

Lash sat in a chair. He felt better though he was weak and his shoulder still felt like a hot iron had been run through it. The pain helped to keep his brain clear.

"Good morning, mi Federal General," Ed Lash said.

Minor didn't answer. He looked first at Stinson, shrugged, looked at the man with the dirt encrusted bandage and swollen eye and the blood soaked blanket over one shoulder. Then, without a word, he reached for the bottle.

"It looks like a fine day," he observed.

"Very good. The guns are silent. I hear horses in the streets. A fine day, General Minor."

"They will be here soon."

"Yes," Ed Lash said.

Minor drank again. He smacked his lips and wiped at his mustachio and then he stared out the window.

"There come some of Villa's staff officers," he said. "I see General Robles. Ah, I always liked Robles."

"A good man."

"What happened to your Americano

friend?"

"I do not know. I will find out in time. Villa should be in soon."

"Ah, yes. A strange one, Pancho. Nobody but a fool would have continued to attack when he knew he was beaten. Have you a cigarette?"

He was a strangely changed man. Lash had never thought that he could be polite. Lash, his eye on the gun, fumbled with his good hand for the last of the crumpled pack. He had been saving the last half dozen. He laid one on the table and Minor took it in a fat hand that did not tremble. He looked it over critically.

"An Americano cigarro. I always liked them. But you never could make wine. Nothing like the champagne from Europe. Have you ever been there?"

"No, mi General," Lash said. "I was never there. I have spent my life in Mexico and along the border. A good country this. Some day when the guns are silent it will be a prosperous country. Listen. I think I hear men coming.

Minor was lighting the cigarette. He leaned back and puffed complacently. "Yes, they are coming. This is the best hotel in town. Officers—Federals or Villistas—always stay at the best hotels. It is a part of war."

Footsteps clumped up the stairs and men came trotting. General Minor smoked on calmly. Out in the streets all was quiet. Down in the lobby came the sound of voices. An officer with a revolver in one hand stuck his head in the doorway.

"COME in," Lash said to Captain Diaz. "So you have deserted your guns?"

"Ah, amigo! I am glad to see you once more! No, I have not deserted. Ah, you should have seen what I did with my Nino. Those Federalses! I showed them. I said, 'My baby, my beloved one, now we will show them,' and we did. *Carrai!* but we poured the shells in. Those gunners. Now I will lose them. Two were wounded and already have gone back on the first hospital train."

"It is gone?" Lash asked.

"It has but left. All the more seriously wounded and all the Americans Villa could find. They are going to Juarez. But you, compadre, will stay?"

"No," Ed Lash said. "I will not stay. I must find a girl on the trains; an enfermera—a nurse."

"Carrai!" grinned Diaz. "He wants a woman. Mexico is full of beautiful women. You can find one here. Ah—this dog of a Minor. I think Villa is downstairs."

Minor rose—and Lash instinctively picked up the pistol with his good hand. "It is time to go," General Minor said.

He took up the bottle and uplifted it, taking a tremendous swig. He started out and Diaz and Lash followed. They got downstairs. Villa's short, dumpy, tired looking figure was in the midst of babbling officers crowded around the portable telegraph outfit. It had been smashed with an ax.

Villa saw Lash and came over. His eyes brightened. "Oho! *Oyez!* So you win the bet?"

"Yes, mi General. Fuentes the butcher is upstairs dio. And now I am very tired. I want to go to the train."

"Of course. I will send you north with the next one. It will be ready to go in a day or two. *Carrai!* but did we whip those pelones! It made no difference that they knew in advance about our forces. We whipped them and we will whip them again. Ah, Minor. A Federal now, eh?"

"Yes, mi General. Better to die a Federal than to be a mule tender."

"Better to die than to run like a coyote from the Rurales, as you did."

Nobody said anything more. Nobody gave any orders. It seemed to be understood. Minor threw away a stub of the cigarette and moved toward the front door of the Hotel Verde. Lash, in some kind of a fascination, found strength to follow. They went out into the sunlight, Captain Diaz walking along behind General Minor with his pistol at ready.

Five hundred soldiers already had been appointed special police. Five hundred others were collecting bodies and carrying them to the edge of town to be piled up and burned.

"A good day," Francisco Villa said. "We whipped the pelones."

The streets were filled with soldiers and the little cavalcade of men, some of them mounted from horses in front on the hotel, moved on up about a block. Minor led the procession. He walked calmly and seemingly unafraid. He was bareheaded. Villa called to a dozen soldiers coming by and barked an order for them to fall in back of himself and his officers. At a sidestreet more soldiers emerged. They had in tow a Federal officer and a Rurale.

"Bring them along," snapped Villa.

Lash followed at his side, talking rapid Spanish. Villa nodded an answer to a question

"Yes," he said. "I remember the man now. The American who came with you. He talked with an American girl —the one he said he had come to find— and the two of them went north together on the train."

"I see," Ed Lash said.

They had come to an adobe wall, partly destroyed by cannon fire. The mounted officers swung down and waited. Villa snapped another order to the men trailing them and they lined up.

"No, no," Captain Diaz protested, as the Federal officer and the Rurale lined up together, with Minor on the outside. "It is fitting that the 'General' stand between two of a kind."

Minor's face changed, perhaps a flitting look of pain and humiliation that crossed it. Lash would never know. He saw Minor take his place between the other two doomed men, and he thought how strange that life could be sometimes.

THE soldiers, under Captain Diaz, had lined up. Twelve of them. They were inspecting their rifles for full clips.

Villa strode over. He still wore the brown hat with the low, skull tight brim. He looked short and stubby alongside the tall, stolid faced Rurale whom he now addressed.

"Have you ever seen me before?" he asked.

"No, mi General."

"Do you know who I am?"

"Yes, mi General. I know."

"I could spare your life."

"Why?" asked the Rurale tonelessly.

"Because I am Francisco Villa."

There was a pause, Villa waited. So did the Rurale. The Federal officer smoked on stolidly.

"Oh, Lash," called General Minor.

"Yes, mi General?"

"Another of those Americano cigarettes, if you will."

Lash stepped half stumblingly forward and extended the pack. Minor's eyes above the bags looked him over as he took one. "Ah. I like these. You are badly wounded, my friend. You should get to the doctors. You have lost much blood. And you hit me very hard."

He stuck the cigarette in his mouth, parting the black, coarse hair above his lip. "Strange," he said. "But I could never smoke a cigarette short because of my mustachios. But these are good

cigarettes. Thanks, amigo. A match?"

Lash managed to get out a match. He lit it and Minor leaned forward to touch the end of the cigarette—his last one—to the white flame. Villa was still looking at the Rurale.

"Do you think," Villa asked the man, "that I shall ever become President of Mexico?"

A nod this time. "Yes, mi General."

"If I should become President and you were still alive, would you be loyal to me?"

"Of course, mi General. The Rurales are always loyal to the Government."

"Then if I spare your life. . . ."

"You are not President of Mexico yet," was the stolid, almost stubborn reply.

Villa wheeled angrily and came back, stepping off the sidewalk into the street. He nodded to Diaz, who, pistol in hand, raised it. He barked out a command. The three men stood waiting. The Federal officer was gazing far into the distance—toward the south—where he saw, or imagined he saw, the last of the Federal army trains carrying his companions to the safety of Torreon. The Rurale seemed bored by the whole affair. Between them General Minor, still in his Federal uniform, puffed away on the American cigarette.

Captain Diaz barked another command. The guns came up and were levelled. They crashed out and dust flew from the adobe walls back of the three figures which already were crumpling. The morning sun played down oddly on the wall, on the three huddled figures, on the group of waiting men, as Diaz stepped forward.

He shot the three of them through the head as they lay in the dirt, and Lash noted that from where he stood the cigarette in General Minor's chubby limp fingers still trailed a wisp of smoke up into the still air.

A man rode by; the dried up little fellow had found another horse to replace his bony little mountain pony. The *viejo* from the Durango mountains who had the eight or nine goats and much land—one hundred paces east and west.

"I don't want to be a Porfirista
I don't want to be an Orozquista,
I just want to be a fighter for Madero. . . ."

He paid no attention to the execution squad over by the wall.

CHAPTER XXIV

IN PUERTA PRIETA some kind of a brooding silence seemed to have enveloped the town for two weeks. The place was silent. The "warriors" who had boasted about going down to help Villa were silent; they had mostly disappeared. The munition salesmen were no longer on the streets. The boasting politicos now stayed in their hotel rooms and said nothing. Nothing except in whispers. No word had come from out of the South for days. Perhaps Villa was winning. It was best to remain quiet and see which side was winning. A man had to remember on which side his bread was buttered. Perhaps the *revoltosos* weren't such bad fellows after all. Perhaps they had been right when they said that the peons must have land and liberty. After all, they *were* the masses of Mexico, and why not give them what they wanted—*if* Villa was winning?

The politicos remained quiet and more quiet brooded over the streets.

The afternoon sun played down on the town. Down at the south end of the street the Immigration and Customs men waited boredly. A few feet away, across the Mexican line, the sentries of

General Gonzales patrolled boredly and even asked the hated Gringos in the green pants with black stripes down the legs if they could spare an American cigarette.

The beef was good. They were fat and well fed. The other men down south were doing the fighting. One day they would drive Huerta and his killers out of the palace and peace, and prosperity, would be waiting for all.

The sentries paced on and up in the railroad station another man paced too. Colonel Holden. He kept glancing at his watch and looking down the track and cursing because the train was not yet in sight. It was coming in from the east—from El Paso.

Steward and Whitley lounged at ease. Like the soldiers across the line, they were well fed, comfortable, contented with their lot. Let the Colonel pace the platform. The old war horse had been a changed man lately. He had been elated when he received the first telegram from Chihuahua City that Gloria was well and in Jim Abernathy's care. But when the lines had been found to be closed and nothing but a blank silence developing from down there where Villa might be doing anything, the old man had changed.

He had forgotten the affairs at the ranch, seemingly. He was older now, worried, almost broken.

Steward looked over at Whitley and grinned. They had a good job; not too much hard work and the pay was ample. Let the old bastard walk the platform. Let him pace. Abernathy would be in pretty soon and they would find out how things lay.

They were still hoping, almost anxious, that they could get back across the line after those cattle. This time it would be different. This time they would take two dozen men, and then if the damned ragged bandits wanted to make a fight of it they would give them a run for their money. So they thought they could kill off ten Americans and get away with it, did they?

Whitley and Steward were aching for another chance to show them differently.

Steward got up. He shifted the gun at his hip and went through the doorway of the waiting room. He brushed at his long hair, of which he was quite proud, and said to Colonel Holden:

"No use to be impatient, Colonel. Train's not due for five minutes yet. They'll be in, all right."

"I suppose so," the Colonel half muttered. "But why in heaven's name don't they hurry it up a bit?"

The train came in. This time only six passengers alighted. Colonel Holden had eyes for only two of them. He ran to Gloria first, holding her in his arms.

"So you got back? You wildcat. What am I going to do with you? Running down there alone and getting mixed up in a revolution. I've had supper ordered for the three of us at the hotel. How are you, Jim?"

Gloria said, "I'm tired, Dad. I want to go home. Have you got a rig handy?"

"Of course, kitten. I always have. But you can't disappoint me this way. I want some time alone with you. You stay here and have supper with Jim and I."

"I want to go to the ranch. Please, Dad. I don't want any supper."

Holden gave in with ill grace, looking at Abernathy. "All right. Go over to Canby's and tell him I said to have the rig ready and drive you out. He can find a man to drive."

She said all right and almost abruptly left them. He saw her go and then turned to Abernathy. The lawyer was smiling, at ease; he looked at peace with the world.

"What's it all about, Jim?" the Colonel asked. "I never saw her this way before."

"She's upset. Lash was killed in the revolution down in a place called Palacio Gomez. One hell of a big battle. They fought for three days. About four thousand men died. Lash was one of them."

"LASH," Colonel Holden said musingly. "You know, Jim, I always liked Lash. Human nature is a strange thing. You can hate a man for knuckling down to you. You can admire him for not being afraid of you. Lash is the only man in this country who wasn't afraid of me. He was mean, tough, brutal; but, by God, he was *all* man! I'm almost sorry he didn't live to come back and see me again. I hated him because he had more iron in his system than I; I liked him because he was, in many ways, a man of principle. How did it happen?"

"I don't know," Abernathy said. "I was told that he was shot in a hotel when he went in after Buck Stinson. He never gave up the idea of getting Stinson. He knew that as long as Buck was alive he could never live easy, after he murdered Rufe. So he had to get Buck."

He went on to explain about Stinson; of how he had turned *colorado* and a brutal, unlicensed killer of helpless, captured men.

"And what about Buck?" Colonel Holden finally asked.

They were walking across the street now, trailed by the two sardonically grinning gunmen. Abernathy said, "I heard reports from some of the other reporters who were in Gomez, just before the hospital train pulled out for Juarez. It must have been quite a fight. Lash killed him in a knife battle in a hotel room because he murdered a little Mexican girl Lash was going to marry."

"Hmmm. I see. Lash mentioned something that day in the office about a girl—a nurse on one of Villa's trains."

"That was the one. Buck killed her and Lash killed Buck. Then he got it in the revolution during the battle for Gomez. Probably from a steel Mauser slug in the hands of a Rurale."

"Hold on a minute." Sharply. "You just said that he was killed in a hotel."

Jim Abernathy shrugged. "I'm only quoting rumors. Nothing more. But this I do know. Ed Lash is dead."

That had been a close one. He had almost slipped up. He must be careful. They went on over across the street and into the office where the dust now lay in a thin film over the lawyer's desk. He brushed at it with his hand and the Colonel said, "Lot of wind blowing since you left."

"It's good to be back again," Jim Abernathy grunted.

He seated himself at the desk. Out in the street a rig drove past. Gloria was on her way back to the ranch. The lawyer repressed a hidden smile. Give her a little time to get over what he had told her about Lash's death and she would come around. She had to marry somebody, sometime. It was an inevitable law of nature. There was nobody left but himself. The one man who stood in their way, a man who haunted his memory, was gone. Lash was dead. He had made sure of that when he bounded up the stairs with a dead man's rifle in his hands and lined the sights at forty feet. Lash was dead.

His world was now complete. He just needed time.

He reached into a hip pocket and brought out a folded slip of paper from his wallet. "This," he said, "is an order from Francisco Villa to General Gonzales allowing us to drive the rest of our cattle up from Sonora across into

Arizona."

He looked at Whitley and Steward. "Tomorrow morning, boys," he announced, "I want you to get about two dozen men. Some from the ranch. All we can spare. Recruit the rest of them from men around town. Hit south and get those cattle rounded up as quickly as possible. This order from Villa clears us. We've got to make use of it while it's good. I saw that damned bandit while I was down in Mexico. He's mean and no good. He's treacherous. We've got to hit while the iron is hot. For I wouldn't put it past that yellow bellied, American murdering bandit to change his mind. Right now he's in the saddle. He's just won a big battle. He's on top of the world, resting his armies in Palacio Gomez and counting his captured cannon and shells. He's lulled into a sense of security. That's what I want. So you'll hit south in the morning and get those cows back. Understand?"

Whitley was lounging against the doorway. It was the same doorway he had lounged against when Lash had been in the office; when one wrong word would have meant the roar of guns.

Whitley nodded. "So we're to go get the cows? Two or three days to drive south with good horses. Then about four or five days to make the line. You real sure about that order?"

"I'll see Gonzales tonight. It will be all fixed."

Steward sighed. He reached for a cigarette. "In a way," he said, "I'm sorry. I wanted another crack at those damned greasers who killed ten of our boys the last time. So now we go down peaceful and bring them back without even a good fight. Maybe they'll help us. That'll be one hell of a note—a bunch of greasers that we hate helping us get our cattle back across the line." He spat.

CHAPTER XXV

GENERAL ARRIGIO GONZALES sat in his office in the abandoned Federal garrison that night and swore at everybody in general. He was a crusty old man in his sixties; tall, cadaverous, leather faced. He had the gout.

He cursed the Gringo beef that he thought had caused it and cursed again when his orderly brought in a stew made of the same beef. General Gonzales had been a *vaquero*—a plain cowboy—back in the mountains when he first had heard that Madero, the Little Fellow, was revolting against Diaz. The vaquero had thought it over very seriously. His two brothers had been rounded up by the Rurales and shipped south in a box car to a far distant place that somebody said was called Moreles. He didn't know where this place was. He didn't know what it was. But it must be some kind of a terrible place because his brothers, uneducated though they might be, could have gotten word to him and said to come down; that it was a wonderful place.

But the General had never heard from them again, and after a time men had come to him and told him that this Moreles was a big country where men from the north died like flies. So it must be a very bad place, or his brothers would not have been forced to go there.

He knew of Madero, too. Madero was a very rich *hacendado* who had decided that Porfirio Diaz, on the throne of Mexico for thirty-four years as "President," must be a very bad man. The General thought so too. Otherwise he would have heard from his brothers down in Moreles. If Diaz was a good man, then he, the General,

would have heard from his brothers who had been rounded up by the Rurales.

But no news had come, and it stood to reason that if a rich *hacendado* like Madero said that Diaz was no good, and Diaz had not let him hear from his brothers—well, then Madero must be right and it was time to fight.

So he had gone to fight in the early revolution, proving to be a good man when it came to handling other men. First they had made him a plain Lieutenant and then pretty soon a Major. Now he was a General. He had been invested with the responsibility of driving the Federals out of Puerta Prieta, and this he had done without ado.

The Federals were there; he was supposed to drive them out.

He had done so, making a straight line between two points; he had gone in after them and they, the cowardly *pelones,* retreated. He was now in charge, Villa was winning the war down south, and all was well.

General Gonzales roared at a scurrying soldier and then yelled at a crying baby out in the garrison, beyond the open doorway of his office. He had allowed his soldiers to bring in their women, but that was no damned reason why the *niñitos* could bawl around the garrison.

After all, he was a soldier and a soldier in charge of a garrison must show some dignity.

One of his privates came in, rifle presented in the proper manner. This pleased General Gonzales.

"Yes, what is it?" he asked.

"You have the visitor, mi General. An Americano from across the border who would have the honor of speaking with mi General."

"Ah," General Gonzales said. "So the Gringos know who is winning the war and now they come crawling to the victors? This is good. I will see this Americano and talk with him."

He waited while the soldier disappeared. Presently the man came trotting and General Gonzales saw the Americano. He was a tall man, with a bony face of the kind the General instinctively distrusted. Madero had not been a bony faced man. Neither was Carranza. Carranza had a beard and this damned Gringo was clean shaven. A bad sign.

General Gonzales pulled up his gouty foot and assumed an air of dignity in the chair back of his desk.

"I am General Gonzales, special representative of Pancho Villa for Sonora. What do you wish?" he inquired.

Abernathy turned and beckoned to a half frightened man who had come with him. He was known in Puerta Prieta only by the name of Pete. He was a Mexican. Pete came forward.

"This man," he said, "has just come from Palacio Gomez and has an order from the great Francisco Villa."

GENERAL GONZALES eyed the two of them and tugged at his beard. "A friend of the great Francisco Villa, you say?"

After all, one had to be cautious with these Gringos. You could never tell about these fellows. They were from *Los Estados Unidos;* the same United States that had sent twenty thousand Gringo troops to the border in the early Madero days.

And a lucky thing they hadn't crossed over either! The Mexicans were fighters. They were the greatest fighters in the world. They would have whipped hell out of these arrogant Gringos.

But they hadn't crossed over because they were a bunch of cowards who were afraid of the Mexican fighters, and so General Gonzales assumed a benign air.

He waited.

Abernathy advanced to where the General sat with one foot on a pack that once had belonged to a soldier. The General wanted to get up to show his politeness, but because of his gout—and the fact that he must not be subservient to these Gringos—he kept his seat. Abernathy spoke.

"I have here," he said, through the frightened Pete, "a note from General Francisco Villa. I have just come from Palacio Gomez, where they have fought a great battle. They have whipped the Federals—"

That one was a mistake, as far as time was concerned. General Gonzales had had no news. He had, in fact, been completely forgotten, far up to the north with his tiny garrison. He must know all the news. Palacio Gomez? Where was that? How many leagues to the south? How long had the battle lasted? How many Pelones had been killed. How much. . . .

It went on for fifteen minutes while Abernathy, through Pete, told him all the details. The lawyer elaborated. The Great General Villa had won a wonderful battle. The Federals were running like coyotes all over Mexico. Soon Villa would be in Mexico City and the new President of the New Republic. Therefore, now that Villa was on good terms with the Gringos, he had kindly consented to let them take all their cattle out of Mexico. Here was the order, signed by the great General Villa's own hand. . . .

General Gonzales took the white slip of paper. He looked at it from first one way and then the other. He could read neither Spanish *nor* English. He squinted at the signature . . . which he also could not read, since he was unable to sign his own name.

"This paper," he finally announced, "is very important. I recognize the message and the goodwill of the great General Villa. And now you would have your cattle driven back across the line into Arizona, because the generous General Villa wishes it so?"

Pete nodded emphatically and Abernathy, catching the sign, also nodded emphatically. *Es verdad.* Is the truth. There was the order.

General Gonzales studied the paper again. One must be cautious with these Gringos. It might be some kind of a trick.

"I must study this paper very carefully, señor," he finally said, and looked very sternly at Abernathy. "You must understand that war is a very serious business. The word of Francisco Villa is very great. In times of war anything can happen. A wrong order and I must go out and have some of my men shot. You surely understand, Señor Americano, that I would not care to have some of my men shot because of a mistake. This is a very important paper. I must study it carefully.

Abernathy put down his impatience. He was fighting rage and disgust. Whit and Steward already had their men lined up and were on their way to the ranch to get a good supply of horses. What was the matter with this old fool anyhow? Couldn't he read? Was he so afraid of his life that he couldn't obey an order?

He said to Pete, "Tell this old sonuva—tell him that of course I understand. This is a very important paper. Perhaps two hours to study it over and then he will give me an answer."

General Gonzales demurred. His chief translator, a Capitan, was off drunk somewhere and the dog probably wouldn't show up until morning. There had not been any fighting of late; nothing to do but eat good Gringo beef. Discipline was lacking.

"I will talk this over with my staff,"

the General announced in a tone of finality. "If you will come at daylight in the morning, I will make my decision."

CHAPTER XXVI

AT TEN o'clock the following morning Jim Abernathy came back from across the line again, scowling but somewhat mollified. General Gonzales had finally given the order allowing them to cross over the border and head south after the herd.

It had been quite an experience. The old *vaquero* had been voluble. He had had most of his higher officers around him, in their best uniforms, while he made quite a ceremony of it. He had three hundred men under his command. Fifty-five of them were officers, including nine Colonels. The Colonels had ringed the office while the gouty old man got it off his chest.

He had studied the paper for many hours during the night, reading it over and over again. It was indeed true, this was the genuine signature of the great Francisco Villa. He had won a big battle and had the Federals running all over Mexico. Soon he would be in the *Palacio Nacional* in Mexico City as the new President. It was good that a new President should be friendly with the Gringos. General Gonzales himself liked the Gringos very much. He had always been friends with them. And now that Don Pancho was soon to become President. . . .

It had gone on and on with Abernathy in a fury of impatience, until finally the garrulous old desert fighter finished and signed an order written by the English speaking Captain. He carefully put an "X" mark on the paper and had then looked up as he gave the pen a flourish.

"You have the word of General Gonzales that you may now take your men and go south for your cattle," he'd said. "We have protected them very carefully, for it is to the interest of the new Government that all property of the Americanos must be taken care of. Not a single head has been touched. Of course," and here the old man had shrugged, "you must understand, Señor, that in Mexico there are many bad men, the same as in your country. Some of them are thieves. While we have been busy fighting the revolution some of these bad men might have stolen some of your cattle. If this be so, then I will find the dogs and have them all shot!"

He had been very emphatic on that point. He also had insisted on gettting to his one good foot and shaking hands with the visitor.

Abernathy went back past the Customs House and mounted his horse. He loped up the street to his office. In front of it lounged twenty men, led by Steward and Whitley. Most of them were from town; loungers, and three or four of them were the long haired "warriors" who, going after the cattle, wanted to boast of being in Mexico while the revolution was on.

Colonel Holden came out of his office. "Well, Jim?" he inquired as the other pardner swung down.

Abernathy let go a grunt that was half sigh. "I finally got it. I waited two hours for his interpreter to be found, and then the old goat had to spout off for fifteen minutes about how some thieves might have stolen a *few* of the herd. He's going to have them shot, when he catches them," he added, grinning wryly.

"I could," Steward cut in lazily, "find them and save him the trouble. It's a job I'd like."

He was gun belted, as were the others. Colonel Holden looked up at him.

"You'll make no trouble of any kind," he snapped out sharply. "This is still a ticklish business. I want you to understand that, both you and Whit. These Mexicans are treacherous and can't be trusted. One false move on your part and that old jackass might change his mind, the ignorant old fool."

"All right, Colonel," Whitley drawled, swinging up. "We'll get 'em back. But they damn well better not start anything. I still haven't forgotten that last fuss. Come on boys, let's get going."

They swung up and took up the lead reins on the four pack horses. Steward said, "Give us three or four days to get down there. No use hurrying through that heat. And we've got to take time to find all the waterholes. We'll need 'em coming back. I figure at least five or six days to make it to the line on the return trip."

Colonel Holden nodded. "When you get within twenty miles or so, you send a rider on ahead to let us know. "We'll be here at the line with all the other hands to help you take them on to the north range."

"All right," was the reply. "Let's roll, boys."

Abernathy said, "I'll be back in a few minutes, Colonel," and swung back aboard his own mount. He rode with the little cavalcade, down past the west side of town and to the line. There, as General Gonzales had agreed, a Colonel and a dozen men were waiting. The men stared stolidly at the armed riders crossing over. Abernathy nodded his thanks to the Colonel, turned his horse, and rode back with a great weight lifted from his shoulders.

IT WAS done. Everything was perfect. Lash was dead and nobody would ever know who had killed him. Gloria would never find out. He knew that she had loved Lash. That part didn't matter anymore. The man was gone, and in time she would come to see where her own interests lay. Marriage to a man who was successful, ambitious, and had his eye on the Governor's chair in Phoenix.

He rode back to the office and left his horse there. Colonel Holden came across the hallway. He almost rubbed his hands.

"I feel like a new man this morning, Jim," he said. "We're going to make a pretty good recovery on our herd, and we are saving money too."

"Saving? How?"

"The bonus we would have had to pay Lash. I'm really sorry the man is dead. But now that he is, we're about six thousand dollars to the good."

"I had," Abernathy nodded, "that same thought in mind. By the way, how is Gloria this morning?"

"We had a long talk last night. She didn't divulge much. Fool thing, running off down to Mexico to get some 'freedom' for a few months. Craziest thing I ever heard of. Why, what more freedom would any woman in the world want than I've given her, Jim?"

"Gloria is different," Abernathy said. "Lots of fire in her. Now all she needs is a couple of weeks to get back into the swing of things and she'll be all right."

The Colonel went back to his office and went to work and Abernathy settled down for the day, taking care of a considerable pile of mail. Several men wanted him to handle cases for them. One, from a mining company, involved a damage suit of a hundred thousand dollars. It was good money; but somehow he wasn't interested any longer. His mind was on far distant things. On bigger things than defending some two-bit criminal for a couple

of hundred dollars.

He turned down all the cases and during the days that followed lounged around town with his eyes always turning south across the line. He could almost picture that first dust haze coming up over the horizon and then the bawl of tens of thousands of dollars on the hoof. It was a good feeling.

He saw Gloria a number of times. She seemed listless, tired, disinterested. He utilized every opportunity to bring up the subject of Maria and how Lash had loved her enough to go into Gomez after the man who had killed her.

The days passed and he bided his time. The world was a perfect place until one afternoon he dropped into Canby's with the Colonel. They were indulging in a beer.

Then a man came in and with a single remark exploded that world into something that suddenly was a very fearful place.

"The train just got in," the fellow remarked. "And I just saw Ed Lash and a big fat woman get off and go down across the line into the garrison."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE hospital train bringing the wounded into Chihuahua City, where the more serious cases were taken off, had laid over a day; and La Gorda, catching all the news, had found Lash. He lay in a neat bed; resting on his right side because of the wound in his left shoulder.

He had been turned almost sideways toward Abernathy when the latter, grabbing up a dead man's rifle in the street and again bounding up the stairs, had fired. The bullet had cut through the shoulder muscles and come out the back. But from Lash's position it had been logical for the Gila cattle man to believe that he had done the job Buck Stinson had failed to do. As a matter of fact, the lawyer had sneaked back a little later, after his sudden panic had subsided, and looked down at the man lying sprawled in the doorway.

La Gorda had come to the train. They had wanted to take Lash off, but he had stubbornly refused. He had come on north to Juarez, and La Gorda had turned her hotel over to the Chinese and come with him as nurse.

"I've always wanted to be a *soldadera,*" she had laughed. "Anyhow, it's about time I took a trip back to the states. I've been looking for an excuse for a long time, and this is it."

They walked down the street together, La Gorda carrying the two bags. Lash still wore the bandage around his head. The area below it, around one eye, was now a dirty brown. His left arm lay against his side, bound tight to prevent movement. It had healed somewhat, that ugly wound from the Mauser bullet, but still could not be moved.

They approached the Customs and Immigration house and the officers demurred. La Gorda began to bellow. "Listen here, young man," she cried, shaking a finger into a startled face. "I've lived thirty years in Mexico and I know General Gonzales better than you know your own mother. Cut out this nonsense and let us go across."

They went across. There was a hotel down the street a couple of blocks, across from the garrison, and they got themselves rooms.

La Gorda came in from her own and placed hands on her fat hips, looking about and sniffing.

"What a dump!" she snorted. "I'd love to get in here with my Chinese and straighten out this joint. Come on, Ed, let's go have a drink and see General Gonzales. Then I want to see Gloria."

"I don't," he said harshly.

He should have known how it would be, he thought. He had told her that when he came back he would have to meet her father, and that it would not be as friends. She apparently had conceded it. So she had come north with Abernathy to be with her father. Well, perhaps she belonged among her own kind. With her father and Abernathy.

"It must be awful to be in love," La Gorda sighed. "I'm sometimes glad I'm old and fat. No worries for me on that score. Come on. I want a drink, and it breaks my heart that I've got to pay for one after thirty years."

They went downstairs. Lash followed her waddling figure down the street and into a cantina where they had a beer. They had another one and then La Gorda spat and ordered a *mezcal.*

"I always did say," she said to Lash, "that beer was belly wash."

They finished the drinks and went out into the street again. Up beyond the Customs House he saw men moving and he wasn't sure but he thought that he recognized the figures of Abernathy and Colonel Holden. Probably his imagination playing him tricks. They crossed over and approached the arched doorway of the garrison. A soldier lounging on duty grabbed up his rifle and barred their path.

La Gorda put a fat hand against the side of his startled face and pushed. "Out of my way, you loafer," she snorted and strode on in.

A few women were inside and a baby was crying. Two or three dogs sniffed about, one her dugs heavy with milk. La Gorda let out a bellow. "Hey! Where's General Gonzales? Tell that old reprobate that La Gorda is here to see him."

From within the office came an answering bellow. Then the General himself appeared in the doorway, hobbling on a cane. She yelled at him, "You old desert dog," and went over to grab and hug him.

This also pleased the General very much. There could be occasions for dignity, such as when the Americanos came to see him. This was different. He beamed at her and he beamed at Lash as they shook hands.

"I saw you only once," he said to Lash. "That was. . . ."

And then he went off into details about a small fight they had had with a dozen Federals on patrol, months before. The way General Gonzales told it, a thousand men had been killed. He himself had been a very brave man.

IT HADN'T been much of a scrap. Lash had jerked his machine gun off the pack horse, set it up, threw out a few bursts that kicked up dirt at a thousand yards and sent the Federals fleeing, and that was all. You could elevate the gun, watch the dust spurts, and scare hell out of them.

The General nodded, beckoning them into the office. He was a very happy man at receiving these old friends. Ah, some of these Americanos were different. Some were the arrogant kind, who thought they were so much better than the Mexicans. Some treated the Mexicans with equality and dignity, as they should be treated. After all, the Mexicans were the greatest fighters in the whole world!

"I am glad you have come to my humble abode," he said, waving them to a seat.

"It's not humble and you know it, you old dog," La Gorda said, seating herself with a sigh. *"Oyez!* It's good to be back again. But I still like Mexico. I wonder what my Chinese are doing?"

"They're probably very happy that you're not down there yelling at them,"

Lash cut in wryly.

They sat in the General's office and Lash asked about the herd. Had the General given permission for it to cross? The General had. He nodded again and again while he told the two about how good it was to be friends with the Gringos. They were good people. He had always liked them. That one in particular—what was his name? Ah, yes, the Señor Abernathy. A muy bien hombre.

Then Lash pulled from his pocket another paper. It also bore the signature of Francisco Villa. It gave specific orders to General Gonzales that the matter of allowing the cattle to cross over the line was to be solely in the hands of Ed Lash. Gonzales listened as La Gorda read the translation. He studied the signature, which this time he recognized.

His face grew dark as Lash unfolded the story of what had happened in the hotel in Palacio Gomez.

"Am I to understand," the old man demanded, "that this dog of an American shot you there?"

"It is a matter between us, mi General. I will settle it in my own way."

Gonzales roared. He forgot his gouty foot enough to get up and begin to stomp up and down the office.

He knew it! He knew that Gringo couldn't be trusted, that clean shaven one who didn't have a beard like Madero or Carranza. He had suspicioned the dog all along. He would have him shot the first time he set foot across the line on Mexican soil.

Lash let him rant, and after the old man had let off some of his indignation they talked again. General Gonzales began to nod. When they left he was smiling.

They had supper in a cafe and went back to the hotel. It was now dusk. The Mexican on duty said there was a message waiting. It was from a Colonel Holden, who asked that Ed Lash come over to the American side of the border and see him. Lash sneered and went up to his room. He laid down for awhile and La Gorda disappeared.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN THE hotel dining room on the American side of the line Colonel Holden at supper in a fuming rage and, for a second time, sent Pete the Mexican trotting down with word that Holden wanted Ed Lash to come see him. Pete came back at the end of a half hour, removing his hat as he came through to the Colonel's table.

"Well?" demanded the Gila man.

"I am very sorry, Colonel, but the Señor Lash almost threw me out. He said there was nothing to talk about."

Holden dismissed him with a curt nod and sat staring at the food. This afternoon everything had been perfect. Now that hard bitten man who so hated him and Abernathy was back again, with a long memory. He would be remembering how Colonel Holden had hounded him out of town after the shooting of Rufe Stinson. He would not be forgetting that Abernathy had forced him to go back into Mexico against his will.

Abernathy came in. He was, to the Colonel's surprise, dressed for a long ride. He sat down and nodded to the waiter. His face was dark with worry.

"Upset about Lash, eh?"

"Yes," Abernathy said, "I'm very upset, Colonel. Lash and I pretty well had it understood that when the time came it had to be one of us. He is not a forgiving man. He's too brutal. He never forgave us for making him go to Chihuahua after that order."

"So it's got to be a shoot out?"

"I'm afraid so," sighed the lawyer.

"And you can't match him?"

"I can make up in brains what I lack in speed with a gun. There's still Whit and Steward and they shouldn't be far below here now. No, it's not that. They'll jump at the chance to give me a hand, after what happened in the office that day. They always hated him because they were friends of Buck and Rufe. They'll want to square up."

"Then what are you worried about?"

"My future, Colonel. You know my plans. They also include Gloria. But what chance will a man have of getting into the Governor's chair with a gun fight against him? It means ruin unless I can do one thing—get him in Mexico. That's why I'm going south tonight to find the herd."

Colonel Holden was silent for a minute or two. Abernathy ordered. "I see," the Colonel finally said. "A man has to do things his own way, Jim. We all work out our own problems in the manner in which we think best. So I shall make no criticism or suggestions in what way you face this thing that has come up between you and Ed Lash. I can only wish you luck."

They finished eating and the lawyer abruptly took his leave. He went out and mounted his horse, a slicker filled with food tied back of the cantle. He was going to travel light and fast. He loped up the street and it seemed that he hardly had taken leave when Gloria and a very fat woman came in. He rose to his feet as they approached and then shook hands with La Gorda. His keen eyes were on the face of his daughter.

Something in them, in the presence of this woman who had accompanied Lash north on the hospital train, boded no good.

"All right, Gloria, let's have it," he said crisply.

She looked over at him, startled. "Have what?"

"You've had some kind of news about Lash through Mrs. Bleeker here and whatever it was, it's bad. Tell me all about it."

"Very well, Dad. But first a question. I want the truth. Did you and Jim force Ed to go to Chihuahua to see Villa on pain of death by hanging?"

Colonel Holden cleared his throat and then put his napkin to his lips. He was startled, shaken. He tried to counter with another question.

"Are you in love with Lash?" he demanded.

"Yes," she said frankly. "I guess I always have been. But he hates me because down in Mexico he asked me to marry him. He said that when he came back he'd have to face you and it wouldn't be as a friend. So when Jim told me that Lash was dead, and I came on home with him, Lash thinks it was because of you. But you haven't answered my question."

"Why, I believe Jim did make some kind of a threat, Gloria. But you musn't let it upset you. Bear in mind the circumstances and what was at stake. Four thousand head of cattle and Lash our only hope. It was a favor to him. He's getting two dollars a head bonus for every one we get back."

LA GORDA cut in with a chuckle that was half grim. "I might as well break the bad news to you now as for you to find it out later, Mr. Holden. It's costing you ten dollars a head, and I'm not sure he'll let them across, after Abernathy trying to murder him down in Gomez."

She had already told Gloria the details. She knew that the girl now loved Lash but there was too much between them to risk their straighten-

ing it out. Now she told the Colonel. By the time she was finished he was almost choking on his food. He was stunned.

He pushed back his chair and rose, and he looked like a man already beaten. Somehow he couldn't have believed it of Abernathy. The man was too intelligent. But either his jealousy over Lash or his desire to save the money on the cattle had driven him to the kind of a murder attempt more on the line of Buck Stinson.

"This," he said, "is terrible. Can you get Lash to come talk with me, Mrs. Bleeker? I'll do anything to make it up to him. I'll pay him his thirty thousand dollars on the cattle we are to get back. And I'm afraid I'll have to dissolve partnership with Jim. I've made a bad mistake and I admit it. But I can't countenance remaining friends with a man who would stoop to such things."

"Lash won't come across," La Gorda said. "He doesn't want to talk with you. I wouldn't try to go over either, were I you. Just let him work things out his own way and maybe they'll become untangled."

Colonel Holden nodded absently, paid the bill, and left them there. He went to his office, sat down in the darkness, and stared out through the white square of the window letting the street light into the room. Lash's plans obviously were plain. When the cattle showed up on the horizon Lash would be there waiting. And he'd probably be backed up by three hundred tough Mexican desert soldiers who would shoot at the drop of a hat.

Abernathy hadn't been too plain about his plans, once he reached Whitley and Steward. Nor was the Colonel too upset about that point; not after finding out the true character of the man who was his partner and wanted to become his son-in-law. Holden sighed and twisted uneasily there in the darkness.

They had played their cards their own way, and he had thought that he was right. There had been too much at stake in those cattle to be squeamish. He knew, now, that he had let his pride overcome good judgment.

He had hounded Lash out of the country because the man had dared to disobey his dictum of no gunplay on the ranch. It hadn't made any difference that Lash had been right; that he had shot in self defense. Holden had only known that he ran that section of Arizona through his powerful influence and that no man was to buck him.

One had, and now that foolish pride of his had almost wrecked a cattle empire, and perhaps his family life; for he knew his daughter too well. She could be unforgiving because her blood was of his own. And she would follow Lash to the ends of the earth now, no matter how much he hated her.

She was that kind of a woman. She had seen what Colonel Holden's own foolish pride had brought down upon him, and she wouldn't make the same mistake.

Holden got up and went down to Canby's. He looked at the night bartender and gave an order. The bartender stared.

"That's what I said," snapped out Holden. "A quart—and get that stupid look off your face. For the first time in my life I'm going to get drunk."

CHAPTER XXIX

FAR to the South a lone horseman drove steadily on through the sands. A bright moon had come out over the desert and he could see a long way. He had had no trouble, meeting but one patrol. These had let him by with

nods. They had their orders from General Gonzales. The Gringos were not to be molested because they were now the friends of Villa. Let them have their cattle.

Abernathy sent his horse on and at ten o'clock he noted a change in the land. The desert was falling away to a lower country that looked like it might contain water. He pulled up, and presently to his ears came the bawl of a steer. This might be the herd, or another Mexican outfit. Then he heard singing that was unmistakably American, and rode forward again.

A man's voice challenged him out of the night, suspicion and even a touch of fear in it. Their nerves, he thought, must be pretty well on edge. You could never tell about these rebel Mexicans. They might have changed their minds within five minutes after the cavalcade left Puerta Prieta.

"It's Abernathy," he called back to the rider and then jogged slowly forward to pull up beside the man. It was one of the ranch hands.

"Why, hello, Mr. Abernathy. What are you doing down here? Any trouble?"

"Where's Whit and Steward?" snapped back the lawyer, ignoring the questions.

The rider turned in the saddle and pointed off to the southwest. "Drop down that edge of the mesa and follow along the base for about a mile," he said. "The boys are camped just around the shoulder of a ridge. You can't see the fire from here. And you better make plenty of racket when you go in. They're a little nervous on the trigger fingers these nights."

"Any trouble with the herd?"

"Not a bit. We found enough men on the ranch to help us round 'em up and get 'em started. Not much of a job. They were sticking pretty close to the water."

"How many?"

"We got a rough count of about thirty-one hundred. The rebels ate around nine hundred head."

The lawyer grunted and rode on. It could have been worse, but he had other things on his mind. He knew that Lash hadn't, upon his return, crossed over to the Mexican side of town unless there was something pretty important about it. It had more to do than the prospect of a gun fight with Abernathy. Had that been all, Ed Lash in the ugly, contemptuous way of his would have remained on the American side.

No, it was something else; something broodingly ominous. It probably had to do with General Gonzales. For Lash had influence with these people. He spoke their language, he had fought with them, he was an old friend of many years' standing with Villa.

Abernathy rode on. He skirted the edge of the bedded down herd, made a half hearted attempt to sing, and finally rode around the shoulder of the sandy ridge and up to the fire.

Six of the men were out on night guard. The others sprawled around the fire on their bedrolls and smoked. A dozen pairs of questioning eyes fastened themselves on his face as he got down. Steward flicked a match and said, "Jim don't ride anytime for his health. I got a hunch that here comes trouble. What've we got—a fight with Gonzales on our hands?"

"I don't know," grunted the lawyer, and squatted down. He reached for tin cup and coffee pot. "Ed Lash is back in Puerta Prieta."

Whitley came upright, shaking back his tousled yellow locks. "I thought you said he was killed in the revolution?"

"He's back. Whit, you and Steward come with me where we can talk alone.

The rest of you men stay here."

They got up and strode into the night and presently sat down on a low cut bank.

"So Ed got back after all?" Steward commented.

"He's on the Mexican side. I have an idea it has something to do with General Gonzales."

"No herd across after all, eh? You say the word and we'll put it across if we have to kill every rebel soldier in that garrison. I ain't forgot—"

"Cut it," interrupted Abernathy harshly. "That would cause an international incident that would have repercussions in Washington and perhaps get us a stretch in a Federal penitentiary."

"Then what are we going to do?" demanded Steward.

"GET Lash first. In the morning. At daylight the three of us will be in certain positions along the line. You'll be out of sight. I won't. I think Lash will come across. There's a thousand apiece bonus in it for you boys."

"We'd better saddle up and get you a fresh horse," Steward said promptly. "Let's get rolling."

They went back to the fire. The men were curious but didn't ask questions. Whitley gave orders to one of the men to take over and to keep the herd going on at daylight. Push it for all it was worth. If they got an early start they should make Puerta Prieta and the boundary by early afternoon.

The three men saddled and began the long trip back.

The night wore on and over on the line sentries patrolled on. Just before daylight Lash awoke. He managed to get on his trousers and boots and then went in and knocked on La Gorda's door. She was already dressed. She had spent too many years running a hotel not to awaken early.

She said, "Sit down on the bed while I get out the bandages and give it a fresh dressing."

They had had quite a session of it after La Gorda's return from the American side of the line the evening before. It made no difference that Gloria had thought him dead and come on north. The difference was going to be in what happened here in town today. For it was to be the showdown. He had some accounts to square up with two men. If it meant killing the both of them, then that was the way it had to be.

He sat with his ugly face a mask as she removed the bandages and looked at the wound. It had begun to heal, but the slightest movement would break it open again. His face looked less swarthy now; almost drawn from the pain of the past couple of weeks.

"You are," she fumed, "a complete and hard headed burro, Ed Lash, for having any thought of going through with this. Oh, I don't mean about the cattle. You earned it. If it hadn't been for you, they might not have salvaged anything. Some rebel army might have come by and driven off the whole caboodle. No, they got themselves into the mess. But I know you too well. Anytime a man would go all the way into Gomez in the middle of a fight to kill another man means that you aren't going to let this lawyer get away with putting a Mauser *balasso* through you. Are you going to kill him?"

"Yes," he answered simply.

"I didn't ask Gloria what she might feel, if you do. There are some things you don't mention. But suppose she's revolted and turns on you, Ed. You love her. Oh, don't tell me differently. I've been kicking around among people who do a lot of loving for about thirty years now."

"It's got to be that way," he said quietly.

"I suppose so," she sighed.

She finished with the bandage, strapping his left arm against his side, after putting on his shirt. He swung the belted holster into place at his right hip and then fitted the gun into the sheath.

They went out to breakfast. It was quiet in the street. A milk peddler came by, sitting far back on the hips of his plodding burro. The garrison was silent. Up the street the sentries yawned and shifted their guns. Beyond the fence the American side was deserted.

Lash ate and went back to the hotel. The first person he saw was Gloria. She sat in the small lobby, waiting. Her face was tired and drawn, as though she hadn't slept much.

"I think," La Gorda said, "that I'll just take a little stroll."

Gloria Holden came to Lash, looking up at his face, and seemingly finding what she sought. "Hello, Ed," she said, and tried to make it sound casual.

"How are you?" he asked.

"All right, I guess. I wanted to see you last night. The Americans are permitted to cross over again, as of this morning. But I'm terribly happy you came out alive."

"Are you?"

By common consent they had gone over and sat down.

"Terribly so. Jim told me you were dead. I didn't want to do anything then but go back home again and forget everything that had happened down there. And I know what happened in the hotel in Gomez. La Gorda told me. Jim—"

"Jim," he said, "is a nervous shot."

"THAT was another reason I came. I couldn't sleep in the hotel. I saw something at daylight from the window."

"Abernathy?"

"Yes, Ed. Abernathy packing a gun. And Whitley and Steward sneaking down along the buildings close to the line. He went after them last night."

"Hmm. I see. Thanks."

Again the silence between them. Across the street in the garrison a bugle blew. A group of horsemen, in from night patrol in the desert, clattered by.

"So now you're going through with it?" she asked.

"It has to be sometime."

She stirred and laid a hand on his good arm. He felt the touch of it, the womanly nearness of her, and it aroused strange emotions—emotions too disturbing.

"What I've got to say," she said, "takes more courage than I thought I had. Down in Chihuahua you asked me to come north with you alone. Do you still mean it?"

He looked at her and some kind of a grin broke his hard bitten features. "I don't love twice," he said, and was surprised at the gentleness in his voice.

"Thank you. If you do, then leave Puerta Prieta with me this morning. Now. Don't stay here and face these men."

"I see," he said, again. "So that would be the price? Run out, let them live, and not clash with your father. Is it on account of him?"

"It's on account of you. But I must ask you to choose between me and this terrible thing that is about to happen. Will you do it for me, Ed; will you please do it?"

He got up and what gentleness that had been in his drawn face was now gone. It was the old Ed Lash, hard, brutal, ugly, who looked down at her.

"No," he said harshly and strode out.

CHAPTER XXX

SHE left him and went out. La Gorda stood on the sidewalk, waiting. "Well?" the fat one inquired.

"He wouldn't budge, Estell," Gloria Holden said. "He's going through with it. Isn't there some way in the world that you could make him change his mind?"

"I've already tried, honey. Let's walk across the line and wait. That's part of a woman's life, I guess; waiting for some man. If the fools only could know how much agony they can cause a woman by just making her wait. I was just over pow-wowing with Gonzales. He sent a big patrol of men south last night to help with the herd. They ought to show up anytime now. I only hope somebody didn't get an itchy finger and cause a fight."

They crossed back over and went up to the street to the American hotel. Grey dawn was breaking into full light, and Gloria caught her first glimpse of Abernathy close up. He looked drawn, on edge, and it was the first time she had ever seen him when he wasn't freshly shaved. He wore boots, and a heavy pistol at his hip.

He passed them by, started as though to speak, and then gave a curt nod. He knew that she knew of his murder attempt on Lash's life down in Gomez. She would have given much to know his feelings.

He walked on down the street, toward the line, and in the lobby she saw her father.

"Where have you been?" he demanded testily. "I haven't slept a wink all night and when I went to your room a few minutes ago you were gone."

She told him where she had been and why; of Abernathy and his two men waiting. He nodded, almost tiredly.

"It's got to come," he said. "God, what a terrible mess this is. I saw men die in Cuba, but in war it's different. There's nothing personal about it. Now there are four men out there waiting for each other, and if I know Lash one or perhaps several of them aren't going to be alive within a very short time. But there's nothing we can do except wait. I'll be glad when it's over."

"So will I, Dad," she said dully.

"I suppose you're going to hate me for my part in this?"

"I don't know, Dad. I'm just going to wait."

They waited with kind of dread people get when sudden catastrophe is impending, and there was little talk among them. Even La Gorda, who had seen fighting of every kind for thirty years, was nervous. Out in the street it grew lighter and still nobody else stirred; just that one impatient man strolling slowly up and down and with always his eyes flicking toward the other side of the border. He knew where Whit and Steward were.

Whitley lay hidden in the back of an adobe shed a hundred yards from the boundary. Steward was a little further over, down back of a fence. Abernathy strolled south again and paused to lean by the fence. He casually lit a cigarette, and noted that his hand didn't shake. He was calm, confident.

"Any sight of him yet?" came in a whisper from the other side.

"None. But I'd swear that I see dust on the horizon. The boys must have got an early start."

"Maybe the herd got restless about two and they decided to pull out. Or maybe they got nervous. They could make it in about four hours if they got them strung out."

Abernathy was staring. He crumpled the freshly lighted cigarette and held

a hand to his eyes, then took it away. There couldn't be any doubt about it.

The herd was coming.

He saw movement down by the garrison and noted that about two dozen riders were saddling up in back of it. Probably the morning patrol, or maybe they were riding down to meet the cattle and give them conduct across the border. Colonel Holden already had cleared with the authorities. They were waiving a few regulations about dipping and inspection for hoof and mouth disease because of the revolution; that much influence Colonel Holden had.

"It's the herd, all right," the lawyer said. "They'll be here in less than an hour. Well, I'm going back down by the Custom house. Keep your eyes open."

"Maybe he won't come out," the other said.

"You ought to know Lash better than that."

He turned and strode away, loosening the gun in its sheath. Whitley lay and smoked and waited. He was watching the riders, all in high crowned sombreros and with blankets over their shoulders. Whitley brushed back his warrior locks and sneered. Every time they went ten feet they had to strap a blanket over their shoulders. He lay and watched them jogging toward him along the line. Steward raised up.

"What did Jim have to say? Any sign of him?"

"NOT yet. But there comes the herd. The boys got an early start. Jim has gone down to try and draw him out."

"He's probably over having tortillas and beans with his greaser friends," came by the contemptuous reply.

The patrol jogged on closer, rifles slung over their shoulders. They were fifty yards away, led by an officer. Now as they pulled past the group suddenly split and a man was hitting the ground, throwing off blanket and the high crowned hat. Whitley saw the first rays of the rising sun shining on a face he would never forget; saw the heavy pistol in Ed Lash's right hand.

"Steward!" bawled Whitley, and came up off the ground, firing.

The crashes shattered the morning quiet. Whitley reeled to one side, triggering fast and, at the same time, wondering where Abernathy was. Lash closed in on him, firing slowly and deliberately and shot him twice through the body. He wheeled on Steward, who was yelling hoarsely, and there, while the Mexicans looked on, they shot it out.

Lash went over to Steward and bent swiftly, flicking out the cylinder of his gun. He punched out the shells, hurriedly reloaded from the dead man's belt, and swung shut the freshly loaded chambers. Then he walked up the street to meet Abernathy running toward him. He thought he heard a woman scream; he wasn't sure. He saw, beyond the line, a group of little Mexican children playing, and made some kind of mental note to watch his fire. He heard the first sharp explosion of Jim Abernathy's pistol, and then they were shooting it out as Gloria, La Gorda, and Holden came running.

They got there as it was over. Lash half leaned against the adobe wall of a building and looked down at the other man forty yards distant. He had fired all six shots at Abernathy and missed three of them. The lawyer lay sprawled with his booted feet still on the concrete curbing. There was a cry, a rush of running feet, and then Gloria had her arms around him and was holding him tight while she broke down and cried.

"All over now, honey," he said softly.

"There just wasn't any other way out. I'd better get back across the line until this thing cools down. Here come the Customs boys." And to Colonel Holden: "There's your cattle. We'll forget the bonus on them. You paid enough."

"We won't forget the bonus, Lash. I've made a terrible mistake and stooped to something I'm not proud of. Lash, I want you back on the ranch. You belong on it with Gila, and Gloria. We might be able to fix up a pardnership deal. Will you come?"

"Will you Ed?" Gloria asked.

"The two of us?" he asked her softly.

"The two of us. I can handle Dad now. I can handle the both of you now, I think," she finished, smiling.

THE CONTRARIES

ONE of the oddest of Indian customs was that which decreed that a man who dreamed of Thunder had a sacred duty to do everything backwards. A dream of Thunder was evidence of divine interest and protection and gave the warrior tremendous distinction. It was necessary, according to this custom, for him to humiliate himself publicy. He was called a Contrary, which describes the manner in which he was obligated to conduct himself. He must wear weeds instead of feathers in his headdress, paint himself all white, and do the opposite of everything he was told to do. Even in battle, if told to charge, he must retreat. His war-cry was an imitation of an absurd little bird called the burrowing owl. This bird seldom perched in a tree, and nested in prairie-dog holes; it was long-legged and had a curious bobbing walk. As can be imagined, the daily actions of the Contraries were often ridiculous. The ignorant and frivolous men of their tribes made them the butts of many jokes; but wiser men honored these few who had been favored by the Thunder God.—*A. Renn.*

THE SIX-MULE TEAM

BEFORE the days of trucks and freight trains, the six-mule team was often used as the "power" in transporting freight through both plains and mountains of the West. Though perhaps not quite so intelligent as a horse, the mule can stand more hardships and requires less food. When well handled, he is of a gentle disposition, and his driver is apt to become quite attached to him.

The mules in a six-mule team are chosen by pairs according to size. The leaders are the smallest pair; the center pair, or "swings" being a little larger; while the pair next to the wagon are large mules and are called the "wheelers." They are trained to be driven by a single line, the driver riding one of the wheelers. The line is fastened to a stick between the lead mules, which is fastened to the bits. The driver pulls on the line to make the mules go to the left, or jerks it a few times to make them turn right. Mules easily become well trained, so that they are managed with little effort.

—*George Arnold Sanderson.*

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Answer to Quiz)

1. According to the Westerner's way of thinking a fence lifter is a very hard rain.
2. Your old-time Western friend would be going after a range horse with a bushy tail.
3. The cowpuncher's slang term fumadiddle means fancy dress.
4. A fuste is a Mexican saddle.
5. According to a cowpuncher's way of thinking giggle talk is foolish speech.
6. If you had a horse of grulla color, you would have a horse of a mouse-color.
7. A hell stick is what old-time cowmen called the sulphur match.
8. *Juzgado* is the Spanish spelling of the familiar western word hoosegow, the cowboy's name for a jail.
9. A long yearlin' calf is a calf eighteen months old.
10. A hog skin saddle is a small eastern riding saddle.
11. The cowpuncher's slang term cold blazer means to bluff.
12. A cuitan is another name for an Indian pony.
13. According to the Westerner's way of thinking a flannel mouth person is a person who talks too much, a loud-mouthed braggart.
14. In a cowboy's lingo, a crow bait is a broken-down horse, a poor horse.
15. False. A churn head horse is a dumb-headed horse, with small intelligence.
16. The western term "hair off of a dog," means a man who has gained experience.
17. True. A person who has gone haywire, is said to have gone crazy.
18. A brand inspector is a person hired by cattle associations to inspect cattle brands at shipping points and cattle markets.
19. True. A brand artist is an expert at changing cattle brands, sometimes used as a reference to a rustler.
20. According to the cowboy's way of thinking a choke strap is another name for a necktie.

THE COWBOY AND HIS WAY OF LIFE

By
ALICE RICHARDS

TO ANY stranger visiting these lands, or to any resident of another country reading about the United States in a book, many things are brought home to him as being very American and having typical American tinges to them. The word America recalls such things and they at once become affiliated with our peculiar way of life. Such a word is the Cowboy of our West, who brings to mind a picture as typically American as our flag. Of those who created for themselves a very definite way of life, the cowboy deserves a very special niche. Perhaps today he does not hold so very important a place in the livelihood of western life as he once did, but he was probably the most picturesque and unusual figure in this country in the last half of the nineteenth century.

Among the things which are attributed to him alone, besides his everpresent chaps and spurs and lasso and melancholy singing, are the independence and courage, which came, as it seemed, quite naturally to him. Amongst the cowboys themselves, praise came very seldom, and there was a good reason for any that finally did come. But when it came, probably the highest praise one cowboy could give another was to halfway admit that "he'd do to ride the river with," for this meant that the cowboy was capable of handling a herd of cattle while crossing a river, and this quite possibly and often did mean that the cowboy risked his life to do so.

If independence and courage ranked high with the young man of the young west, it was not only due to the fact that it was bred in him, but it was also due to the fact that such courage was necessary, for the cowboy like any other type of human, had his enemies. Among them were the horse thief, the homssteader, and the sheepherder. Probably the most despicable of these was the horse thief, the man who deserved to be hanged to the nearest cottonwood, for stealing a cowboy's horse in those days meant that the cowboy was at the mercy of the Indian, who was at that time, untamed.

As for the nester, or the homesteader, he was a hated individual with the cowboys, too, because he brought with him to the West that had always been wide and open, the fences that spelled the death of this open range, where the cattle could be unmolested.

The sheepherders were naturals for being picked as enemies. Their sheep nibbled the grass down to the ground, and their sharp little hooves dug down to the roots, ruining the grazing land for the cattle to use, and sometimes, they were the cause of the cattle dying by starvation, when no green grass was found left.

The cattle men had been settled and established long before the sheep men came into view, and thus they took the view that the sheepherders were nothing but intruders. They banded together and drew imaginary boundaries which the sheep were not to cross, thus leaving some places for the cattle alone to use, but to this plan the sheepherders paid not the slightest bit of attention.

This move of being ignored called for war to the end between the two kinds of Westerners, and the cowboys began it by placing saltpeter, which is known to be fatal to sheep but having no effect at all on the cattle, where the sheep would be sure to find it and eat it, and finally die of its poison. Next, they made raids on the camps of the sheep men, scattered and killed all the sheep in the camp's vicinity, and drove out the herders. But this could not go on very long, and at last, the sheep men, just like the nesters before them, finally got big enough to be heard by all who listened, and they came into their own, making a permanent place for themselves in the West. And so the cowboy had no choice but to recognize them as being part of his country from thence onward.

The cowboy came into his own when the heyday of the cattle raising began—right after the Civil War. Between 1866 and 1884, he was all powerful in the West, but after this period, the homesteaders' fences doomed the range once and for all. More than five million head of cattle were driven north from Texas before this time, and it was a good period in the life of the cowboy, for his cattle raising.

But if the cowboy played an important part in the development of the West, there was also another important factor. The hero, as well as the villain of the whole affair of the West's development is the long-horned Texas steer brought to this country by the earliest settlers from Spain, long before The United States had stretched its arms into the Western territory at all. A good description of this long-horned steer is that he was a light, wiry, long-legged, angular creature, active and wild as a coyote, and above all, able to live on the range the year round, through summer heat and winter snow. Actually, he comes from Andalusia, with the first Spanish colonists, and he has loomed so large in the annals of the West ever since. In the middle of the last century, great herds numbering tens of thousands of these long-horn steers were driven up from the Rio Grande to meet the railroad as it pushed ever deeper into the then prairie country.

Is is believed that as long as there remains the slightest trace of the long-horn steer in the vicinity of the West, there will always be a cowboy to wach over and guard him.

THE END

DESTRUCTION OF THE ERIE TRIBE OF INDIANS

By
FRANCES YERXA

THE Eries were famous as the most powerful and warlike of all the Indian tribes. They lived at the foot of Lake Erie, at a place called Tu-shu-way, now the city of Buffalo. When the Eries heard of the confederation formed with the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagos, Cayugas, and Senecas, which went under the name of the Five Nations, they imagined it must be for aggressive purposes. They were confident as to their superiority over any of the other tribes around them, but they dreaded the power of such combined forces. In order to satisfy themselves as to the power and intentions of the Five Nations, the Eries cooked up this plan. They sent a messenger to the Senecas, who were their nearest Western neighbors, and invited them to select one hundred of their most active and athletic young men to play a game of ball against the same number to be selected from the Eries.

The message was received in the most respectful manner, a council of the Five Nations was called, and the proposition was discussed, and a messenger was dispatched with the decision of the council to decline the challenge. This made the proud and warlike Eries bolder, and the next year the offer was renewed, and after being again considered, was formally declined. This didn't satisfy the Lords of the Lake, and the challenge was renewed the third time. The young braves of the Iroquois were very excited and clamored for acceptance and finally the council gave way and the challenge was accepted.

After much delay, one hundred of the flower of tribes were chosen. An experienced chief was the leader of the party and they were to give him strict obedience. A grand council was called and they were charged to observe a peaceful course of conduct toward their competitors and to allow no provocation, however great, to be resented as an act of aggression on their part. They were to represent themselves as a great and powerful nation, anxious to cultivate peace and friendship with their neighbors. Then the party took up its long wilderness march for Tu-shu-way.

When the chosen band arrived near their destination a messenger was sent forward to notify the Eries of their arrival and the next day was set aside for their entry.

They brought no weapons. Each had a bat used to throw or strike a ball. It was a hickory stick, ornamented, about five feet long, bent round at one end and a deer throng netting woven across the bow.

The chief of the Iroquois brought gifts of robes, wampum, silver and copper bands, ornamented moccasins and many articles of great value as the stake and wager on the part of his people. They were matched by the Erie with stakes of equal value.

The game began, and although played with desperation and marvelous skill by the Eries, was finally won by the Iroquois, who took their prizes in triumph. The Iroquois had accomplished the object of their visit, and they prepared to leave, but the chief of the Erie said their young men being fairly beaten in the ball game, would not be satisfied unless they could also have a footrace. The Iroquois accepted the challenge and were again victorious.

As a last trial of courage and prowess of his guests, the Chief of the Eries proposed to select ten men to be matched with the same number of Iroquois, to wrestle, and that each victor should kill his adversary on the spot by braining him with a tomahawk, and tearing off his scalp as a trophy. This savage proposition was not pleasing to the Iroquois, but they accepted the challenge with a determination, should they be victorious, not to execute the bloody part of the proposition.

A Seneca was first to enter the ring, and he threw his Erie amid shouts from the excited multitude. The victor, however, stepped back and declined to slay the victim lying at his feet. Instantly the Chief of the Eries threw his tomahawk and scattered the brains of the vanquished warrior over the ground. His body was dragged out of the way and another Erie stepped into the ring to be as quickly thrown by his adversary and then splattered by the Erie Chief. Then a third man met the same fate. The Iroquois Chief didn't like this sort of thing, so he gave the signal for retiring. The victory of the Iroquois only served to increase the jealousy and alarm of the Eries and to convince them that they had the most powerful rivals to contend with. They knew of no better way to secure peace than by exterminating all who might oppose them. They decided that their only chance of success against this growing confederation, would be to attack each tribe singly. So a powerful war party was assembled to attack first the Senecas living at Seneca Lake.

It happened that there lived among the Eries, a Seneca woman, who in early life had been taken prisoner and had married an Erie "brave." He had died and left her a widow without children, a stranger in a strange land. Seeing the terrible preparation for the onslaught upon her people, she decided to warn them of the coming danger. So at night she traveled by the Niagara river and reached the shores of Ontario. She found a canoe and pushed out into the open lake and coasted along the mouth of the Oswego, where she found a village of her nation. She told them the fateful news, and immediately runners were sent

to all the tribes telling them to meet in grand council at Onondago, where they decided to meet their foe before they could have time to attack.

Five thousand warriors were organized, and also a reserve corps of one thousand young men who had not yet been in battle. The bravest and most experienced chiefs were placed in command, and they started their march. For days they continued to advance. Then their spies brought news that Eries had already crossed the Genessee river in great force. The Eries had no idea of the approach of their foe.

They met at the outlet of the little lake Honeoye, and this stream, alone, divided the two arrays. The reserve force of the Iroquois was kept concealed. Nothing could resist the fierceness of the Eries at the first view of their hated foes. They rushed through the stream and fell upon them with shrill yells and fury. The Iroquois could not hold up under this onslaught and the first ranks had to yield ground. As the fight thickened and became more destructive, the Eries realized their true situation. Their enemies had combined for their destruction, and they found themselves engaged in a struggle, not only for glory, but for the very existence of their nation. The combat grew from that instant more bloody and more obstinate. Seven times the Eries had been driven back across the crimson stream, but always regained their ground, and now when they were exhausted by the appalling contest, the shrill, blood-curdling yells of the Iroquois reserve were heard. They turned to meet this fresh and formidable, foe, ready to die. The battle was lost and all that remained was to meet the death they courted like true warriors. Just a few Erie braves escaped to tell the news to the sad wives, old men, and children.

Many years after, a powerful war party of the descendants of the Eries, who had fled beyond the Mississippi, made a last desperate assault upon their hereditary foes, but with the same result. The Eries were not only defeated, but they were slain to a man.

ADVICE FROM CODY

EMANUEL DUBBS used to run a roadhouse outside of Dodge City. One day when he was practicing with his six-shooter, a well built young six-footer rode up to his place. The stranger watched him as he fired at the tin cans he had placed on the fence posts. Presently the young fellow suggested he throw a couple cans up in the air. Dubbs did so. Out flashed the stranger's revolvers. There was a roar of exploding shots. Dubbs picked up the cans. Four shots had been fired. Two bullets had gone through each can. "Better not carry a six-shooter till you learn to shoot," the stranger suggested, as he put his guns back in the holsters. "You'll be a livin' temptation to some bad man." The stranger was none other than Buffalo Bill Cody. *R. L. Wayne*

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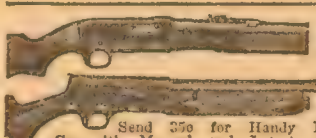
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QUEJO-KILLER

By

ANTHONY B. OTT

THE legendary history of the West and the Southwest is pretty well documented. It is possible to go through hundreds of references about these territories, modern as well as old, and garner interest, elaborate biographies of the many bad men who terrorized these areas. Usually these books have numerous references and bibliographies—newspapers, magazine articles, other books, etc.

Yet, one of the worst of the killers, almost psychopathic, was a half-breed Indian who never seems to have been treated with the dread respect that he deserves. Quejo, the half-breed Cocopah, brutal and merciless, modern and real, is barely remembered to this day. In "Desert Country" by Edwin Corle, about the only good, if short, treatment is given.

Quejo was born to a nameless Socopah girl on a little island in the midst of the Colorado river close to the Army Post, Fort Mojave. The time was roughly 1890. The father was a bigger enigma than the mother, if that is possible, and from these miserable antecedants Quejo must have inherited the dreadful germ that inspired him. The child was accused of having white blood—this was quite likely—but never proven. The tribe's various medicine men tried several times to destroy the child but the poor, ignorant Cocopah girl, sparked by the inevitable courage of any mother protecting its young, managed to escape from the tribe.

Immediately young warriors were dispatched to recapture her and after a long and tedious chase she managed to elude them completely, apparently committing suicide by throwing herself and the baby in the Colorado River. The warriors naturally would never lose face by admitting that it was possible for her to have escaped them. And so the tribe of the Cocopah accepted this likely story, assuming that whatever had occured had been for the best and that the tribal deities would see that she received, to them, her just deserts.

They made an error.

The girl may have been stupid, but she was a mother defending her child, and with almost indomitable courage she managed to take the child from her pursuers, escaping over the most rugged territory that can be imagined. Torn and bleeding, in despair and hopelessly lost, she made her way across vast stretches of desert land, barely finding enough water to sustain her.

QUEJO, even at this stage of the game—an infant in arms—was as hardy as his mother. Nourished by the meanest trickle of his mother's milk, he managed to live through the terrible journey. Almost a walking skeleton carrying a starving child the Cocopah girl finally collapsed in the sand not far from the present town of Searchlight. Here, the two would have died, and the heritage that they would have left the world—nothing—would have been best of all. Unfortunately, some Paiute Indians, on the war path, stumbled on them, and because they hated white men more—not because they loved Indians more—they rescued the pair.

What became of the girl is unknown, but the the child grew up to be one of the most "successful" men in his trade.

Again freakish Fate stepped in and preserved the life of this monstrosity who was to terrorize a whole territory. Had the braves followed what were their normal inclinations, they would have buried a hatchet in the skull of the child and the Southwest subsequently would have unknowingly been grateful.

In the course of his lifetime, Quejo managed to kill some twenty-three men, a record touched by few, even such vaunted figures as Billy the Kid and Wild Bill Hickock. Like "the Kid" Quejo was on the other side of the fence, but unlike him, there was nothing romantic about him. Quejo in modern times would be termed a psychopathic killer of the worst type and hunted down relentlessly until caught. But when he started his depredations, at the prime age of twenty-five, he was not brought to the public attention.

It all started with an Indian by the name of Bismarck.

Where "Bismarck" got his name, the origin of the quarrel, and even the exact nature of its execution are still unknown, but we can imagine it happening somewhat like this:

Bismarck tangled with Quejo, and when they parted Quejo in his warped, distorted mind knew that there would be one more "good" Indian soon. Nursing his cankerous hatred of Bismarck, Quejo bided his time and knowing the nocturnal habits of his enemy he decided that the logical thing to do according to his ethics was to bushwhack him at the first opportunity.

BISMARCK lived in something resembling a battered shack and each evening he left the menial job he held in town to go home, probably to dream of the traditional "vanished glory."

Quejo knew his habits and he lay in wait for him behind a small knoll that rose at one side of the trail which Bismarck ordinarily used. His body, well concealed in the thick grass that masked the knoll, Quejo nursed the newly stolen Win-

chester carbine. A rag about its breech kept dust from it and the clean sharp smell of the gun oil pleased Quejo. This would be so simple.

It was the first time and he was nervous. The hackles rose on the back of his neck as he heard the slow *clop-clop* of the man's small, beaten-up pony. But there was nothing nervous in the way he levered a cartridge into the chamber at the first sound of the hooves.

Bismarck unsuspectingly rode along the familiar trail, the jogging of the horse beneath him a soothing pleasant feeling. Half-asleep, the Krag-Jorgenson army rifle which he had acquired by legitimate purchase from a sale of Army stores, carelessly lay across the saddle.

He passed the knoll completely unaware that Death was lurking within a few feet of him and that his meeting with it was a certainty.

When Bismarck had ridden perhaps twenty feet beyond the knoll, the grasses on its top parted and in the still-clear twilight Quejo's head popped out. Slowly and with infinite caution he drew a head on the Indian's head. Cradling the carbine against his shoulder, gently squeezing the trigger, he loosed a single shot. It was enough.

Bismarck never knew what had hit him. He had no chance to use his Krag, the tool in whose use he prided himself. Without a sound, with a neat clean hole through his head, his nerveless fingers released the rifle and he tumbled from his horse.

So it must have gone.

APPARENTLY Bismarck's death was of no import, for from this start, Quejo moved into the bigtime.

The amazing thing naturally enough is that Quejo killed less for profit than for pleasure. He took an insane delight in killing. In his perverted mind dealing death was a matter of sheer enjoyment and he took the craftsman's pride in his work.

In spite of his orgies of killing, the numerous posses that were later organized seemed to have no success in catching him. This, in light of the fact that all of his "work" was done within a limted radius of less than 200 miles, is astonishing.

In 1919 he made a mistake that almost scotched his pathologic career—he murdered the wife of a miner, the first white woman he had slain. This immediately brought a hue and cry for revenge by both the husband of the murdered woman, Douglas, and a deputy sheriff of Clark County named Frank Wait.

For the next twenty years, a merciless, relentless hunt went on—with utter futility. After each crime, the Indian would take to the hills, roam through the cavernous territory surrounding the Colorado River, and successfully evade all pursuit.

Quejo killed indiscriminately. Miners, working men, possemen, whole families—anyone that fell to his fancy—died. And to, in spite of doing all these things, he was never seen. His trade-

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By

OSCAR J. FRIEND

OCTOBER ISSUE

ON SALE AUGUST 5

mark, a .30 calibre bullet or a typical knife-stab, was very clear evidence of the fact that he had done another job.

This unending butchery went on until about 1930 when Quejo disappeared from sight. Nothing more was seen or heard from him and no more murders were attributed to him. In fact, the pursuing posses broke up and for the most part he was forgotten.

There was one, however, who had not forgotten. Frank Wait, the deputy, dogged Quejo's trail tirelessly. Regardless of how slight the rumor of Quejo's presence. Wait would trace it to its source and try to find out more information. Everything led to a blind alley. But he never forgot.

In 1940 Wait, in spite of the fact that his legal commission was no longer in effect, followed a rumor that at last brought to light, and to a sort of justice, the Indian fiend.

Into the mouth of a cave bordering the Colorado, Frank Wait led a number of men. Wait went in, and he was satisfied by the sight of the remains of what had been a perpetual nemesis—now dead of starvation.

After the desultory interest that had been shown in Quejo by a relatively calmed and unworried populace, it would be thought that there would be some rejoicing and that the matter would be forgotten.

But not so. The undertaker to whom Quejo's body had been delivered, learned that he would be unpaid for his work, and desiring to gain something, he put the body in a glass coffin with plans for exhibiting it. After much wrangling, reminiscent of children rather than adults, things were finally settled to everyone's satisfaction, including Quejo's.

A CIVIL WAR DRUMMER

★ By LEE OWENS ★

THE tales of the West began long before the Civil War was fought, and many of the West's finest men died, fighting for what they believed to be the right cause. It was only after many years of warfare that the Union Army proved to be the strongest in numbers and material, but it did not prove that there was a priority in courage and greatness on their side, too. Many strange and unbelievable feats of fearlessness are still reported coming to light these many years after all the fighting has ceased, and this is just one more tale about the courage and greatness of men, be they over 21, or just twelve, as our little Southern drummer lad who plays the lead in this pathetic story.

When the war was first declared, Southern enthusiasm ran high among the men and women, both, and almost every man, whether he was single, married or married and father of children, volunteered for service. A young man, with a wife and a small son, was among the first to enlist from East Tennessee. The man, whose name was Lee, was killed in battle and the young widow, left without any means of support, took her little boy, and with him travelled to her sister's home in St. Louis, Missouri, hoping to find some peace and to be able to forget the terrible ordeal she had just gone through. But Mrs. Lee was not able to forget her husband or all he had stood for. She had loved her husband and felt that if he had felt strongly enough about a cause to leave their happy home and enlist, and finally, to give his life for it, it must be worth something. But whether it was right or not she knew she had to apply herself to the cause, taking up where her late spouse had left it.

But what could a woman, a widow at that, do to help in a war? There was nothing she could do that she was not already doing, but still she felt that it was not enough. She sought employ-

ment, and then decided that her little boy, then twelve years of age, might be of some use to the Southerners too. Perhaps he could serve as a drummer boy, as he had done previously. She took the youngster to the camp nearest St. Louis at that time, Camp Benton, and she applied to the captain of the regiment for her son's admittance into the Southern Army as a drummer. The captain was about to dismiss them both from his room as he was much too busy to talk of anything so ridiculous as such a young boy being in service, when the little fellow himself spoke up, and told that he had already served with Captain Hill in Tennessee, as a drummer. At this, the captain could not dismiss him without at least hearing the boy play, as the statement the youngster had offered was filled with such confidence and decision. So he called in the regiment's fifer, who was six feet tall, and whose form was both angular and bony, and who looked quite comical next to the little "midget" drummer. The fifer, who had been a miner from the West before signing up with the Southern Army, decided to get rid of the boy by playing one of the most difficult selections he could remember. And through it all, the boy followed along. Before he had ended, the Westerner had taken a great liking to the boy's pluckiness.

The captain listened intently, and when it was all through, he turned gravely to the mother of the little boy, and told her he would take the youth.

The boy, whose name was Edward Lee, soon became a great favorite with the men in the company to which he was assigned, and whenever there was anything to be divided after a foraging of the neighboring sector in which they were located, "Eddie's" portion was always set aside first. The little boy, whose mother had given him up to help the Southern cause, wanted nothing better for her boy than that he should serve well, and when she had left him to the care of the captain that day, she had asked him to look after her son, and to bring him home safely.

But it was soon seen that this could not be done. The company was soon ordered on the march and toward Springfield. It was a long trek, and it took them through many fields and swamps, and many times when there was a long stream to cross, it wasn't unusual to see the long-legged Western miner carrying the small drummer boy across the muddy waters on his back.

The Union Army finally became aware of the company that Eddie was attached to, in the late August of 1861. Commanded by General Lyon, they encountered the Southern army in force on a small stream called Wilson's Creek. The battle was long and bloody and during the fight, the Union forces, their commander having been killed, were forced to retreat.

That night, after the shooting had died down, the guard on duty heard from below the camp's settlement, a small drumming sound coming from the ravine. As it grew louder, the whole camp, now aroused, realized that their little drummer

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boy was still down there where the engagement of the day had taken place, among the casualties.

A volunteer from the camp crawled down the hill to rescue the boy and found him leaning against a tree stump and drumming on his drum. He hadn't been able to move at all, as both of his legs had been blown off. A dead man, a Union soldier, lay at his feet, where he had fallen, after crawling over to bind the boy's legs with his belt, just above where they had been blown off. As the Southern soldier prepared to pick up the small boy and start toward their camp, they were surprised by troops of the Union army, and taken prisoners. The soldier asked the officer who captured them to carry the wounded lad in front of him with care, and he did so, but upon reaching the enemy's camp, the little drummer boy from East Tennessee, whose mother had given the only valuable possession she had left to the cause her husband had died for, had gone to his father's side, in the heaven which is set aside for all good and brave men.

BURIED GOLD

★ By MILDRED MURDOCH ★

MANY legends of our great Southwest concern buried treasure. In the hope that such legends are based on fact, men still search for hoards of gold and lost mines. The desire for sudden wealth and the adventure of discovering it has always fired men's imaginations and lured them on to neverending quests.

One story tells of a great collection of gold nuggets, seen but twice, in the desert sands of Arizona, and never rediscovered. A shepherd girl became lost in a sandstorm and remained in one spot in the shifting sands for many hours, waiting for the wind to cease. When it did, she found that the ground beneath her feet was covered with gold nuggets. Far away across the sands, she saw a landmark and knew she could find her way home. Gathering up as many nuggets as she could carry, she eventually found her way to safety. But the winds blew again, and the sands shifted, and never a trace was found of the gold she had surely seen.

Another legend grew up about what must have been the same display of gold. A cowboy came upon it accidentally, and picked up all his saddle pockets could hold. But he forgot or missed directions, and became lost. To save his strength, and his life, he had to throw away the gold to the last nugget. In the desert every traveller's track is blown away, and there was nothing to mark the spot where the fortune rested.

What the sands uncover one day, they will cover the next. But man's eternal hope says also, what they cover, they will some day uncover —and he keeps on searching.

KING OF THE RANGE

By
★ PETE BOGG ★

DURING the long period of years when the grazing lands of the West were wide open and free to all, the longhorn was king of the range. Developed from a mixture of savage wild cattle, partially domesticated stock from Mexico, and larger, more placid animals brought in by pioneers from the East, the longhorn found in Texas an ideal region for his evolution. Roaming the miles of wild range country, he grew and spread and multiplied, so that when the northern country was opened for grazing, the longhorn stocked the entire West.

Because of the scarcity of water and other climatic conditions in Texas, the longhorn developed amazing powers of endurance and ability to go for long periods without water, and to withstand hunger, heat and cold. His vitality was tremendous. Though surly and morose in disposition, he was easily controlled by a mounted man.

In appearance, he was the weirdest, oddest specimen of cattle which has ever existed. His body and legs were long and thin and bony. His tail was too long. His color was unpredictable, an indiscriminate combination of brown, red, black or yellow. His face had a sad, hang-dog expression. His outstanding, most unbelievable feature, however, was his set of horns. Sometimes achieving a length of seven or eight feet, they curved up and out from the sides of his head, sometimes corkscrewing, oftener sweeping straight up. Although a steer reached his full size when about ten years old, his horns continued to spread and grow longer until the animal died.

Man added to his grotesqueness by the brands added to indicate ownership, especially before hides became valuable, when it was advisable to use a small, neat brand. At first, brands were often huge, easily distinguishable blobs on the body of the animal. Strangest of these early brands was the Jingle Bob, used by Rancher John Chisum. The animals' ears were split, so that half the ear hung down, and the other half stood erect as Nature intended. To the already peculiar appearance of these cattle, was added the effect of having four ears, two up and two down!

His odd appearance notwithstanding, the longhorn steer was a worthy product of his environment. Evolved as he was in a wild, difficult country, his horns developed as a protection, as did his traits of savage temper, propensity to panic, and terrific endurance. Modern cattle breeders have made an exact science of producing stock to fit present conditions, and to furnish the best quality beef or the healthiest calves; Nature bred, in the longhorn, an animal admirably suited for the beginning of a great industry on the wide lonely ranges of the West.

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COWBOY JOE

JOE was a cowboy. He lived back in the days before the turn of the century, before modern ways and inventions began to make a science out of the raising of cattle. Where Joe hailed from was nobody's business; maybe he was an outlaw from the East; perhaps he had gotten into trouble on some other ranch, or had simply become restless and wanted to see a new part of the country. Nobody asked and nobody cared. It was taken for granted that he was courageous and brave, with a heart and a constitution not easily daunted, and a love for the hard ground and the open sky. If he did not prove equal to the stern conditions of the cowboy's life, he would soon be forced out of the society of the craft.

Joe was a lean, muscular fellow. He had the firm flesh of the man in perfect physical health and in top condition. His life in the saddle, with long hours of exercise and a diet of plain food, left not an ounce of fat on his body, but only hard, strong muscles. Wind and sun and alkali had darkened and toughened his face and hands. His hair and mustache were sunburned and bleached to a faded hue. His eyes had a perpetual squint, as protection against the bright sun.

Joe was a poor figure on his feet. His gait was awkward and shambling. He slouched along. His legs were bowed from the long hours in the saddle. It was in the saddle that Joe was at his best. He sat erect, a masterly horseman. Every act showed strength, every movement showed the play of muscles doing their work with ease and sureness.

Without Joe, and others like him, there could not have been a cattle industry. Joe and his kind were the mainstay of the entire industry. Honest and faithful to his employer, grim, hard-working, reliant, he was the central figure of his era. He was produced and shaped by the industry in which he played a leading role. *A. Morris*

IN SPITE OF HELL AND HIGH WATER

THE expression "in spite of hell and high water" is used currently to denote the surmounting of tremendous difficulties. The phrase is a legacy of the cattle trails of old, particularly of the period when Texans were driving longhorns by the hundreds of thousands up to northern grazing lands. The cowboys in charge of the drive had a goal to reach, and a fierce and unalterable determination to arrive at the end of the trail with their hornspiked masses of animals. Sometimes they had to drive the cattle through flood waters at every river, and the areas between rivers were often one continuous hell of storms, wind, dust, stampedes, fights with Indians, and innumerable other obstacles. The plucky trail drivers persisted, and reached their goal eventually, "in spite of hell and high water." *G. Watts*

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MONEY ISN'T EVERYTHING-

(OR IS IT?)

BY GROUCHO MARX

WHAT do you want to save up a lot of money for? You'll never need the stuff.

Why, just think of all the wonderful, wonderful things you can do *without* money. Things like—well, things like—

On second thought, you'd better keep on saving, chum. Otherwise you're licked.

For instance, how are you ever going to build

that Little Dream House, without a trunk full of moolah? You think the carpenters are going to work free? Or the plumbers? Or the architects? Not those lads. They've been around. They're no dopes.

And how are you going to send that kid of yours to college, without the folding stuff?

Maybe you think he can work his way through by playing the flute.

If so, you're crazy. (Only three students have ever worked their way through college by playing the flute. And they had to stop eating for four years.)

And how are you going to do that world-traveling you've always wanted to do? Maybe you think you can stoke your way across, or scrub decks. Well, that's no good. I've tried it. It interferes with shipboard romances.

So—all seriousness aside—you'd better keep on saving, pal.

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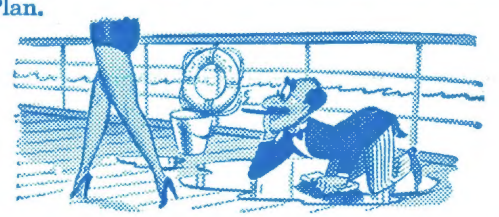

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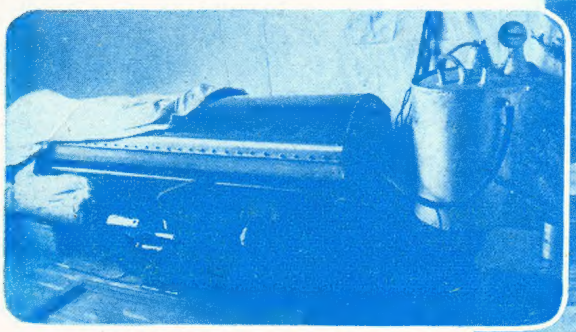

Actual photograph of Elena in her rejuvenation apparatus.

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